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I Am America: The Chicago Defender on Joe Louis, Muhammad Ali, and Civil Rights, 1934-1975

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Graduate Program in Kinesiology
A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree in Master of Arts
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I AM AMERICA

The *Chicago Defender* on Joe Louis, Muhammad Ali, and Civil Rights, 1934-1975

Thesis format: Monograph

by

Nevada Ross Cooke

Graduate Program in Kinesiology

**A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts**

**The School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies
The University of Western Ontario
London, Ontario, Canada**

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the effect that the careers of Joe Louis and Muhammad Ali had on civil rights and race relations in the United States between 1934 and 1975 from the perspective of the black community, as interpreted through a qualitative analysis of the content provided by the *Chicago Defender's* editorial posture and its black readership. Primary source material was divided into four categories – general news, general editorials, sports editorials, and reader contribution – and analyzed for each boxer's career. The results of this primary source analysis were significant in that they contradict many current beliefs. The findings indicate that Joe Louis' career had a positive effect on race relations and civil rights. As well, the findings indicate that Muhammad Ali's career had a neutral effect on race relations and civil rights, presenting a balance between positive and negative effects.

KEYWORDS

Joe Louis, Muhammad Ali, Cassius Clay, boxing, effect, black, civil rights, race relations, Chicago Defender, qualitative analysis, sports editorial

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PREFACE

The title of this paper – “I Am America” – is taken from one of Muhammad Ali’s many sound bites, this specific one with regard to his victory over Floyd Patterson in 1965. Ali stated after the fight that he was not just trying to beat Patterson, but everyone he believed to be supporting Patterson: “I am America. Only, I’m the part you won’t recognize. But get used to me. Black, confident, cocky; my name, not yours; my religion, not yours; my goals, my own – get used to me! I can make it without your approval! I won’t let you beat me and I won’t let your Negro beat me!” Grant Farred has an excellent treatment of this quote, as well as the Ali-Patterson fight. In short, he reveals how Ali positioned Patterson as the subservient black man of the conservative 1950s. When Ali claimed “I am America,” he was establishing himself as the “personification of the discontent and the unrest” of the 1960s, of blacks and whites alike.¹

¹ Grant Farred, *What’s My Name? Black Vernacular Intellectuals* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 38, originally cited in Muhammad Ali and Richard Durham, *The Greatest: My Own Story* (New York: Random House, 1975), 105.

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Young men and women are so caught by the way they see themselves.
Now mind you. When a larger society sees them as unattractive, as too
black or too white or too poor or too fat or too thin or too sexual or too asexual,
that's rough. But you can overcome that. The real difficulty is to overcome
how you think about yourself. If we don't have that we never grow,
we never learn, and sure as hell we should never teach.

-- Maya Angelou¹

Professional athletes are a source of emulation and admiration. Children buy their endorsed sneakers; adults buy their endorsed jerseys. Grown men and women stand in line for hours upon hours in the hope that they can get an autograph from a sport celebrity, accompanied by a quick photograph of a “pretend friendship” to proudly display in their homes. As a recent commercial for the NFL Shop attests, sports memorabilia ranks as “one of five things you’d save in a fire.”² Billions of dollars every year are poured into the realm of sport. And still, the popular colloquialism remains: “it’s just a game.”

Although an athlete’s influence often remains limited to their sphere of sporting endeavour, in rare instances they have been credited with affecting social change. The lofty title of “social mover” or “agent of change” is reserved for the individual who does something with their life – something important. Oftentimes, these titles are set aside for those that fight for the rights of others. Abraham Lincoln – President of the United States of America – issued the Emancipation Proclamation, and abolished slavery. Martin Luther King Jr. – minister and

¹ Larry Chang and Roderick Terry, ed., *Wisdom For The Soul of Black Folk*, (Washington: Gnosophia Publishers, 2007), 94. This is a popular quote that is widely attributed to Maya Angelou, famous twentieth-century American author and. She is also a black woman, known for being one of the voices of her generation. It was difficult to track down the exact origin of this quote, so I resorted to citing a popular “quote” book. Whether this was a remark in an interview or came from one of her famous books, I was not able to ascertain.

² The commercial spot – entitled “Things We Make” – attempts to impress upon the viewer the importance of NFL-brand memorabilia. So important that, in the event of a fire, you would feel compelled to save it above all others.

activist – had a dream. Malcolm X – minister and activist – went to extremes in the quest for equal rights. Each was assassinated for what they believed in. While assassination was certainly not the norm, many men faced persecution and segregation for trying to shake up the social order.

While Joe Louis and Muhammad Ali were most certainly noted practitioners of the sweet science, their careers had the potential to amount to much more than just a series of ring brawls. Each fought in a time period distinct for its intensified climate surrounding race relations and civil rights.³ The life and times of Louis and Ali made them unique and, thus, important figures to study relative to the subject of race relations and civil rights. Joe Louis saw his career unfold alongside the turbulence of World War Two. Muhammad Ali's career began in the midst of the violent social upheaval of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Both men reached their primes at a time when race relations and civil rights were a hotbed of activity. As boxers – heavyweight boxers, no less – they also enjoyed the popularity and sport hero status that came with pursuing and holding the most coveted title in American sports: Undisputed World Heavyweight Boxing Champion. Each man owned the potential to extend his celebrity and sport hero influence on blacks and whites alike.⁴

The hallowed ground of sport heroism has a long history, stretching back to the Ancient Greek concept of “arête.” The concept of arête “implies functional excellence in all the ways a man can be excellent: physically, morally, intellectually and socially.”⁵ A modern model for sport hero classification exists, and espouses similar tenets: physical excellence, moral

³ Throughout this paper, the terms “race relations” and “civil rights” will be used relatively interchangeably. It is necessary to delineate the use of these two terms, as well as provide the working definitions that I will be operating with in this thesis. “Race relations” is a general term that is used specifically in this paper to refer to the state of relations between blacks and whites. “Civil rights” refers to the general crusade for equal individual rights and freedoms by the black community. The two are similar and surely related, but are not the same. Civil rights can grant all men equal status under the law, but race relations can still keep whites from viewing blacks as a lesser people, regardless of what laws have been passed. Of course, the reverse can also exist. These two terms will also be used differently in the context of time. “Race relations” will be focused largely on the period of Joe Louis' career, whereas “civil rights” will appear more frequently in discussions of the career of Muhammad Ali. “Civil rights” should also not be confused with the “Civil Rights Movement” that gained momentum in the 1960s and '70s. There will be no catch-all term for these, so when “civil rights” is used, general civil rights is being referred to. When the movement itself is being mentioned, the “Civil Rights Movement” will be credited.

⁴ Throughout this paper, the word “black” will be used to denote African-American. It encompasses the terms blacks, African Americans, Negroes, etc. Black has been chosen for its simplicity and, if nothing else, its monosyllabic nature. The goal of this paper is not variety in rhetoric but information transfer. Adopting one simple catch-all term will help optimize the transfer process. This is meant out of no disrespect.

⁵ Robert K. Barney, “The Hailed, The Haloed, and the Hallowed: Sport Heroes and Their Qualities – An Analysis and Hypothetical Model For Their Commemoration,” in *Sport History: Olympic Scientific Congress 1984, Official Report*, ed. Norbert Müller et. al. (Niedernhausen: Schors-Verlag, 1985), 98.

excellence, social excellence, and the survival of the judgment of time. Certainly both men were prime physical specimens, displaying skill that is lauded and emulated to this day. The principle of moral excellence – said to encompass courage, self-sacrifice, self-control, courtesy, and modesty, among others – may be a point of contention. While Joe Louis lived what can almost be considered a pious life – abstinence from drinking and smoking for the majority of his career and life – there remain accusations that he was an “Uncle Tom,” living the false existence the whites wanted him to.⁶ Ali, on the other hand, lived a relatively pious life similar to Louis’, but he may also occupy the opposite end of the moral spectrum. Ali was hardly known for his modesty; his unwillingness to serve his country could be another point of dispute. The principle of social excellence may also be uncertain. Generally defined as “protecting the interests of the community before self,” both men may occupy opposite ends of the spectrum. Again, the “Uncle Tom” accusation levied against Louis overshadowed what he did for his people and his country. On the other end, Ali’s extremist tendencies and Muslim affiliations alienated his country and members of his race.⁷ The passage of time – the fourth tenet – has combined with the death of Joe Louis and the ailing health of Muhammad Ali to soften the negative connotations attached to each boxer. Far removed from the status of simple celebrities, both men have a strong claim to sport hero status. Ali’s brash and controversial personality is widely applauded, celebrated, and emulated in modern sporting society. Louis’ quiet contributions are overshadowed by the emergence of Jackie Robinson, the destroyer of barriers. Despite everything, Louis and Ali each possess a strong candidacy for the position of sport hero.⁸ As black sport heroes they were physically, morally, and socially excellent in their own ways, and they have withstood the test of time better than most other athletes of similar ilk.

⁶ “Uncle Tom” is a pejorative term for a person who is seen as “slavish” or excessively subservient, particularly to authority figures. The term is often used by blacks to describe other blacks who are seen as excessively subservient to whites. Rather than a descriptor, however, this term is seen as an insult. An “Uncle Tom” is, through their subservience, perceived as participating in the oppression of their race; “selling out” their own race, as it were.

⁷ “Black Separatist,” Southern Poverty Law Center, accessed 19 May 2014, <http://www.splcenter.org/get-informed/intelligence-files/ideology/black-separatist>. The Nation of Islam – the Muslim religious movement that Muhammad Ali converted to – was led by Elijah Muhammad, mentor to Ali. Both the Nation and Elijah Muhammad himself have faced accusations of anti-white, black supremacist sentiments. The Nation claims whites were created by a renegade black scientist thousands of years ago as an inherently evil creation. More information available on the Southern Poverty Law Center’s website.

⁸ For greater detail on his modern sport hero model, see Robert K. Barney’s “The Hailed, The Haloed, and the Hallowed: Sport Heroes and Their Qualities – An Analysis and Hypothetical Model For Their Commemoration,” originally published in the Olympic Scientific Congress 1984 Official Report, specifically p. 99-102.

BLACKS IN SPORT AND BOXING

Understanding black athletes in America requires understanding the position that black non-athletes hold in America. David K. Wiggins wrote a piece on the notion of double-consciousness in black athletes, where he translates the early writings of W.E.B. Du Bois, a prominent black scholar and activist, to make them relevant to the black athlete. Du Bois wrote about blacks in America living a double life: black and American, and never the twain shall meet. Beginning in the latter half of the nineteenth century, Wiggins takes this concept of double-consciousness and translates it to black athletes.⁹ This notion of double-consciousness gets at the duality that was present among – and maybe even necessitated by – black athletes in America. To continue in their field it became necessary to develop a different personality; one more presentable than the one ascribed to them by whites. To better understand this duality requires examining the black athletes and the sports which they played.

Blacks suffered from the stereotypes placed upon them by whites. These stereotypes made it difficult for them to integrate with mainstream society and, naturally, society's sporting culture. Though the culture of sport alludes to a concept of inclusiveness where hard work and dedication are the only required character traits, it was anything but that. The traditional, bourgeois notion of sport in early North America is well-studied and needs no elaboration here. Blacks, however, were not privy to this area of white life.¹⁰

What blacks were privy to was oppression. Frederick Douglass, a man who escaped slavery to become a social reformer and writer at the time of the Civil War, was one of the first black men to view sport with the power to affect lives. As an ex-slave, Douglass considered sport to be a tool of oppression used to occupy slaves, preventing them from doing something "meaningful" or understanding the situation they found themselves in. Thus, Douglass held a distinctively negative view on sport and recreation. Though he ascribed it a wholly negative connotation, he deserves credit for understanding that sports extended far beyond the realm of

⁹ David K. Wiggins, "The Notion of Double-Consciousness and the Involvement of Black Athletes in American Sport," in *Glory Bound: Black Athletes in a White America*, ed. David K. Wiggins (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1997), 200.

¹⁰ Wiggins, "The Notion of Double-Consciousness and the Involvement of Black Athletes in American Sport," 200-201.

leisure. The negative attitude that Douglass espoused may also be one of the primary reasons why future scholars perceived and represented sport as a trap or safety valve.¹¹

The two men that followed Douglass as “leaders” of black America were Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois. Existing and writing in the decades following Douglass, each of these men held a relatively softened view of sport. Perhaps in response to President Theodore Roosevelt’s insistence on the Greek ideals of strong mind and strong body through rigorous sporting activity, as well as the desire for entry into white American society, Washington’s Tuskegee Institute promoted tennis and golf as sports for black consideration. Du Bois, on the other hand, noted that blacks tended to vilify recreation and amusement, rather than embrace it. As with everything, he stressed moderation, but he saw no need to stray from the benefits recreation had to offer.¹²

Post-Reconstruction, when these leaders were active, there were three sports to which blacks contributed the most: horse-racing, baseball, and boxing.¹³ Black athletes gained and participated in these sports more than any other because they were the sports determined to fit the natural “aptitudes” of the black man. The black jockey rose to prominence through the belief that the bloodlines of the horse determined its performance, not the man riding it. As such, jockeying was suited for the physically gifted but intellectually inferior. Jockeying was thus tasked to blacks, and whites refused to challenge this monopoly because of the stigma attached to the position.¹⁴ James Weldon Johnson, another black academic and activist, notes that as purses increased for jockeys, so too did white participation, pushing blacks out of the position. Baseball, at the time, had far less blacks participating, and the team concept acted as a barrier to acceptance. Johnson theorized that the team atmosphere allowed for too much racial prejudice to decide membership, while at the same time it resisted individual achievement. In boxing,

¹¹ Jeffrey T. Sammons, “‘Race’ and Sport: A Critical, Historical Examination.” *Journal of Sport History* 21, no. 3 (1994): 216.

¹² Sammons, “‘Race’ and Sport: A Critical, Historical Examination.” *Journal of Sport History* 21, no. 3 (1994): 217.

¹³ Sammons, “‘Race’ and Sport: A Critical, Historical Examination.” *Journal of Sport History* 21, no. 3 (1994): 218. Reconstruction refers to the period following the American Civil War. It refers to the country as a whole, and also to the South specifically, as the defeated Confederacy had to be reconstructed after their stand against the North had failed. In the South, what had to be reconstructed was both state and society, as – especially pertinent to this study – the Emancipation Proclamation which freed the slaves of the rebelling states in 1863. The South had been heavily dependent on slavery, enough so to go to war with its own countrymen to protect it, and with its abolishment, there naturally occurred the need for change.

¹⁴ Wiggins, “The Notion of Double-Consciousness and the Involvement of Black Athletes in American Sport,” 201-202.

Johnson, found that blacks had the “fairest chance” of all the sports because of the dependence placed upon individual achievement, skill, and stamina.¹⁵

Blacks had reason to participate in sport aside from the frivolity that recreation provided. Wiggins writes on the realization by black athletes that many of the privileges usually accorded to whites awaited them upon their success. They received adulation from the sporting public, as well as large sums of money that allowed them to live comfortably. This bolstered their self-esteem, self-respect, and created a sense of accomplishment. One of the most visible and alluring rewards was property ownership, and it had enormous symbolic importance to blacks. Whites could downplay the skill of a black athlete, but not their land, houses, and other material possessions. The effect these possessions had was twofold: they were testaments to the abilities of the black athlete, and they countered the white stereotype of the lazy and incompetent black man. This success, however, never freed them from their bonds of being a coloured athlete. Despite their early successes, many doors still remained closed to blacks. As time wore on and public sentiment shifted, doors that were previously open began to close as well. As Wiggins phrased it, “the American dream of unlimited possibilities was ultimately shattered for black athletes.” By the turn of the twentieth century, most blacks had been excluded from major American sport and were forced to compete in parallel organizations, if at all.¹⁶

With a firm stance against blacks in mainstream sport adopted, America had drawn its “colour line.” Blacks now required an emissary to cross this line and prove their place in sport. Unfortunately, this was a daunting task, and could not possibly have been charged to one man in one lifetime. Thus, the struggle became a sequence of struggles, born across many decades and many men.

The first great black athlete to assault white “sensibilities” was Jack Johnson. In 1908, Johnson became the first black heavyweight champion. He established a new code of behaviour during a period in time shaped by lynchings and Jim Crow laws.¹⁷ He beat white boxers handily in the ring, and outside the ring he flaunted an oversized personality that enjoyed fast cars, fast dress, and fast (white) women. According to Gerald Early, he served as the catalyst for the “New

¹⁵ Sammons, “‘Race’ and Sport: A Critical, Historical Examination.” *Journal of Sport History* 21, no. 3 (1994): 218-219.

¹⁶ Wiggins, “The Notion of Double-Consciousness and the Involvement of Black Athletes in American Sport,” 202-205.

¹⁷ For more information on Jim Crow laws, see page 33, footnote 33.

Negro” that emerged during the Harlem Renaissance. Johnson was hailed as a race hero, and he “punctured the myth of Anglo-Saxon supremacy.” Both Du Bois and Washington, though, agreed that Jack Johnson impeded race progress. Nat Fleischer held that Johnson was one of the greatest boxers of all time, and Arthur Ashe called him “the most significant black athlete in history.”¹⁸ Despite – perhaps even in spite or because of – negative reaction from the white community, the black public adored Jack Johnson.

The next great black athlete was Joe Louis. Jack Johnson had left Louis quite the legacy: after Johnson’s title was “reclaimed” by whites, the colour line was again drawn, and whites – with increased fervour and “reason” – returned to believing blacks to be savage, uncontrollable creatures. The only way Joe Louis could have differed more was if he were born white. Louis won the heavyweight title and “played the humble hero and personified the accomodationist leader.” Lawrence Levine argued that Louis’ fighting style allowed blacks to shed their “trickster mask” and fight – legitimately – in the centre of the ring without having to resolve to “black tactics.”¹⁹ Louis fought many momentous contests and contributed to the war aims during World War Two, endearing him to the American public: “He fostered patriotism, generated pride and dispelled prejudice.” His commitment to America, despite the continuing segregation, influenced millions of blacks, and he truly became “the people’s choice.”²⁰

At the same time Joe Louis was fighting, Jesse Owens was running. A track and field athlete, Owens chose to participate in an individual sport as well. He had a dominant college career but his crowning achievement came at the 1936 Olympic Games in Berlin – “Hitler’s Games.” Amid a heavy backdrop of racist exclusion and Aryan supremacy in the lead up to World War Two, Owens would win four gold medals: the 100 metre dash, the 200 metre dash, the 4x100 metre relay, and the long jump; setting Olympic records in the long jump and the 200 metres, and a world record in the 4x100 metre relay. As Dorinson put it, Owens “had driven four spikes into the myth of the master race and Nazi invincibility.”²¹ In an article he wrote on the

¹⁸ Joseph Dorinson, “Black Heroes in Sport: From Jack Johnson to Muhammad Ali,” *Journal of Popular Culture* 31, no. 3 (1997): 116-118. The quotes pertaining to the “puncturing of the myth” and the “most significant black athlete” are both found in Dorinson’s work. For more information on Jack Johnson, see Chapter 2, specifically ‘The State of the Art,’ page 23.

¹⁹ “Black tactics” were the tactics ascribed to black fighters. According to whites, black fighters would never stand toe-to-toe in the middle of the ring and “have at it,” preferring instead to feint and box defensively. Interestingly enough, this became one of the dominant styles of modern boxing. At the time, though, men stood toe-to-toe and beat each other senseless. Anything that differed from that fighting style brought confusion and anger.

²⁰ Dorinson, 119-120.

²¹ Dorinson, 121-122.

1936 Olympic Games, Wiggins noted that the black press believed that the success of black athletes in these Games should serve as reason for every black in America to strive for success in all fields of endeavour.²²

On 15 April 1947, Jackie Robinson made his major league debut with the Brooklyn Dodgers, becoming the first black baseball player to break the colour barrier. Robinson also broke with the tradition of successful black athletes deferring from team sports. Robinson was a much-beloved hero for blacks, not only playing but excelling on the field. As Jules Tygiel argues, Robinson combined “heroics, courage, triumph – the stuff of Horatio Alger dreams. He validates our nation’s quest for fair play coupled with social progress.”²³ Robinson had a long and successful career in America’s new premier sport, and this endeared him to blacks and whites alike.

With the 1960s came a dramatic changing of the guard: civil rights became more militant, and so did the athletes. A young Cassius Clay captured the heavyweight title in the early years of the decade, and then converted to Islam, becoming Muhammad Ali. He then refused induction into the armed forces, vilifying himself to an American public that was still wary of blacks. Ali, however, never relented, and this endeared him to a young America hungry for change. He became legend to a new generation. He was one of the last great black sports heroes to break down barriers for the black athlete.²⁴

In his paper on black heroes in sport, Dorinson wrote on the model of the black sport hero, and called on preeminent anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss for clarification:

Popular hero myths serve to resolve unwelcome contradictions in order to restore equilibrium. In this vital task, the hero functions as healer, savior, deliverer, scapegoat and questor. Heroes mediate among competing forces in society with which they must also synchronize.

Dorinson elaborated that, in the era of Jim Crow, the black hero had to be attractive, yet non-threatening. This necessary passivity may have alienated younger, headier blacks, but it was the

²² David K. Wiggins, “The 1936 Olympic Games,” in *Glory Bound: Black Athletes in a White America*, ed. David K. Wiggins (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1997), 78.

²³ Dorinson, 123-127. Horatio Alger Jr. was an American author best known for his children’s and juvenile novels about “rags-to-riches” stories. He frequently wrote about poor boys rising out of their downtrodden situations through hard work and determination to achieve a comfortable middle-class life.

²⁴ Dorinson, 128-130.

tactic that was necessary for success. When the Second World War opened a new door for blacks, Louis and Robinson seized the opportunities they had been waiting for.²⁵ With more doors opened years later for Ali, he took on a different persona from his predecessors, and became the hero that they needed at that juncture.

The effects that these black sport heroes had was vast. They changed a sporting culture for all those who followed. Their successes are linear – the product of cause and effect – and could not have occurred without precedence or proper climate. Marcus Garvey, black political leader and writer at the time of Johnson and Louis, thought highly of boxing:

Joe Louis, Jack Johnson, Harry Willis and other great Negro pugilists have brought to us undying honour and given us recognition that we probably would not have had so easily otherwise. If in nothing else, in the realm of boxing, the Negro has raised the status of the black man.²⁶

The influence these black sports heroes possessed also came to the attention of black political and social leaders. Garvey kept close ties to Joe Louis, and provided him counsel throughout his early career. Walter White, leader of the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People (NAACP), befriended Louis and tried to protect his image, seeing in him an important role model and ambassador for blacks. Malcolm X held views similar to those of Douglass, seeing sport as a negative concept. He realized, however, that young champion Muhammad Ali represented a weapon of tremendous potential. Malcolm realized Ali could be used to spread his views and influence to thousands of people; perhaps the Nation of Islam realized this as well.²⁷

The black athlete in America has struggled markedly. They have existed within Wiggins' notion of "double-consciousness" and succeeded. Black athletes were forced into marginalized roles in which they had to excel. Little by little, their influence grew and their social bondage lessened. Many trailblazing black sport heroes – notably black boxers – changed the way whites viewed black athletic achievement, and this in turn changed the way that whites viewed blacks. Jack Johnson was the initial challenger to the idea of white supremacy. Joe Louis assaulted the idea, doing so with a manner never seen or expected, becoming a "credit to his race." Ali took

²⁵ Dorinson, 130.

²⁶ Marcus Garvey, "The American Negro in Sport," in *The Unlevel Playing Field: A Documentary History of the African American Experience in Sport*, ed. David K. Wiggins et. al. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 167.

²⁷ Sammons, "'Race' and Sport: A Critical, Historical Examination." *Journal of Sport History* 21, no. 3 (1994): 220.

the opportunities and freedom that Louis had created and operated in his own niche, becoming synonymous with the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. At the heart of black athletic achievement was the desire to compete and be viewed as equal; this spread and affected the common man as well. Black sporting heroes became immensely popular because many blacks realized that the black athlete and the black man struggled for the same end: acceptance. When black sporting heroes succeeded, they too succeeded.

RESEARCH QUESTION

The primary question to be answered in this study is *what effect did the careers of Joe Louis and Muhammad Ali have on civil rights and race relations in the United States from the viewpoint of the black community, as interpreted through a qualitative analysis of the content provided by the Chicago Defender's editorial posture and its black readership?* The perspective of the black community will be the primary lens through which this question will be investigated. Because the opinion of blacks is sought in relation to this question, it is important to choose a newspaper that is produced by and for the black population. Popularity and circulation are also important factors to consider. The *Chicago Defender* exemplifies the aforementioned criteria.²⁸

The role of athletes in race relations and civil rights has been well studied. This topic, however, has often been analyzed in hindsight. The *Chicago Defender* was one of the most prominent black newspapers in the United States – perhaps the most prominent. In that respect, by examining a prominent black newspaper, I hope to address what impact each boxer had on race relations and civil rights as noted by one of the largest black newspaper readerships in America.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology undertaken in this study was a survey and qualitative analysis of the contents of the *Chicago Defender* for the aforementioned era of each boxer, with a focus on letters to the editor and the various editorial-style columns contained within the paper; specific attention being paid to the editorial columns contained within the sports section. These two aspects of the paper were analyzed in an attempt to gauge the views of the general public,

²⁸ The selection process that produced the *Chicago Defender* will be presented in Chapter 4: The *Chicago Defender*.

whether it be a direct translation of what they thought (letters to the editor) or the paper's attempt to influence the general readership with its own views (editorial content).

Many smaller questions were addressed to give this paper proper context. They will proceed on a chapter-by-chapter basis, addressing things in a relatively chronological order to understand events as they happened. First and foremost, the position and prominence of the *Chicago Defender* was analyzed. The state of boxing was also analyzed to understand the position that the black athlete holds in the sport. It also allows a translation of the importance of boxing to the American people. Background information was provided on the state of race relations and civil rights preceding and during the careers of each boxer. Because this study deals with two prominent black boxers and their effects on the black community, a survey of race relations contemporary to the times was appropriate. Each boxer also received a brief summary of their life and career to better understand the research as it is presented. To better understand and present the research, the material was split into two categories: the Joe Louis Era and the Muhammad Ali Era.

Primary research was conducted through an analysis of the *Chicago Defender*. This occurred in two forms: visual reconnaissance of the newspaper via microfilm, and an indexed search of the paper via ProQuest Historical Newspapers. There were two forms of analysis based on source availability.²⁹ The primary method of analysis was visual identification via microfilm. This was the primary and preferred method because it allowed analysis of the entire paper as it existed at the time of its original printing. By viewing the entire paper, it allows the proper importance to be placed not only on content, but the way in which that content is presented; not in the interest of content analysis, necessarily, but to take stock of where and how information is displayed. The secondary method – an indexed search via ProQuest – was conducted in the absence of microfilm, as well as supplementary to primary microfilm research. This search was conducted using various keywords – typically the first and last names of the fighters with various Boolean search operators – and the ProQuest database allowed results to be filtered for advertisements, banner headlines, editorials, cartoons, etc.³⁰

²⁹ See the "Limitations" section for more information.

³⁰ Boolean search operators are the (AND), (OR), and (NOT) operations typically used and recommended by libraries and archives. These allow you to delineate what you are searching for, making it as specific or broad as necessary. Other operators include the use of quotation marks to search for exact phrases, or hyphens to exclude words from a search.

DELIMITATIONS

Both Joe Louis and Muhammad Ali had long and successful careers, and because of this it was necessary to limit what will be surveyed. As such, two primary periods of influence will be examined: the Joe Louis Era and the Muhammad Ali Era. The Joe Louis Era will encompass newspaper articles from 4 July 1934 – the day of Louis’ first professional fight – to 29 November 1952 – one year prior to Louis’ last professional fight. Similarly, the Muhammad Ali Era will span from 29 October 1960, until 31 December 1975, following a similar protocol but adjusting for source availability.³¹ A one-year period following the career of each fighter was observed. The period of one year was used because it provides enough time for reflection on a recent retiree, but not so much time that a researched, unbiased opinion (reminiscent of an academic study) can be formed. One thing this study seeks is emotion, and emotion is always tempered by time.³²

Though each fighter had a respectable, and in some cases popular, amateur career, only professional careers will be investigated.

There will also be an 8 year gap in the source material being researched. This is a purposeful gap, and it exists because the material found in the gap does not meet the goals of this thesis. This gap falls after the one-year anniversary of Joe Louis’ career, and lasts until the first edition following the professional debut of Muhammad Ali.

LIMITATIONS

As with any study that plants its roots in primary source material, it is limited to how far that source material will take it. In Canada, access to smaller-scale American newspapers is always difficult. Presentation of information was, in some cases, as important as the information itself; thus, microfilm was the method of choice for viewing the *Chicago Defender*. Microfilm has its limits, however, and despite some luck, it was no longer feasible (or possible, potentially) to view the *Defender* via microfilm for newspapers dated after 1966. Luckily, the *Defender* is indexed and available online via the ProQuest Historical Newspapers - Black Newspapers database. Switching from a microfilm-combing method to an archival index search is a

³¹ See the “Limitations” section for more information.

³² This study seeks emotive opinions. Its aim is to survey feelings: the feelings that the black community had for these boxers, the feelings they felt necessary to share with the newspapers, the feelings the newspaper felt compelled to share amongst its readership.

modification of the method due to the availability of sources, hence its inclusion as a limitation.

The difficulty of acquiring the *Defender* microfilm and the reliance on an indexed search led to another pratfall: the indexed search only included newspapers to the end of 1975. The Muhammad Ali Era was originally intended to span from 1960 to one year following Ali's 1981 retirement, but the constraints had to be adjusted for the source material. Despite this adjustment, and despite seven years of potential research missing, Ali's career had largely started to wind down by the conclusion of 1975. Ali only fought ten more times after 1975, with decreasing regularity. In 1978 he lost his title to Leon Spinks, and regained it that same year, becoming the first man to win the title three times. Though it would have been nice to include, these fights were nowhere near as important as fights prior to 1976, thus the integrity of this study should remain.

Another limitation involved the edition of the paper that had been copied to microfilm. As the *Defender* grew in popularity, it began to publish a "National Edition." It also began to publish "local" editions for different areas aside from Chicago, the "Gary Edition" for Gary, Indiana being an example. The edition that was native to Chicago was the "City Edition." These various editions presented slightly different information -- notably specialized personal and business ads -- and preliminary investigation showed that major stories were available across all issues. When the *Defender* grew in popularity further, it began publishing a daily edition, and moved to two primary editions: the *Daily Defender* and the *Chicago Defender*, which remained a weekly and was published on weekends. The weekend edition of the *Defender* was the most available edition on microfilm, and requests for the material furnished me with the weekend edition. With this limitation, the microfilm that existed was examined, and the daily editions were analyzed via indexed search.³³

ORGANIZATION OF THE STUDY

This study was organized so as to be accessible and thorough. The early chapters were written to provide all the information necessary to understand the data that was collected and analyzed. Background information on everything pertinent to this study was provided. Each

³³ Though limiting, I have not included this as a delimitation. It was not an issue during the Louis Era, and all editions (Daily, City, weekly, etc.) were searched via the index. The only thing that this lack of availability affected was the desire to survey the microfilm. Despite this, all information remained available with no limits. Thus, I have categorized it as a limitation.

boxer was given a brief biographical treatment, and their careers were placed in the context of the civil rights movement surrounding them. When possible, everything was presented chronologically, as it happened. A chapter was also dedicated to the source of this study, the *Chicago Defender*. Understanding this newspaper is essential to understanding the data collected in this study. The data is presented in a chapter unto itself, and then analyzed in the following chapter.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Primary Source Identification

The careers of these two men transpired at a time when the increasingly efficient transfer of information was making the world more accessible by the day. Before the internet, social media, and the prevalence of television, America featured two primary disseminators of information: the newspaper and the radio. The fights of Joe Louis were covered extensively in newspapers and reported live on the radio. In the middle of his career, Louis' title defense rematch against Billy Conn became the first televised World Heavyweight Championship bout in history. Ali's fights enjoyed the same media treatment, with an obvious reversal in the proportion of television-to-radio coverage. Each fighter received great attention from both white- and black-owned print, radio, and television outlets.

While the radio was certainly popular, it lacked the on-demand content of a newspaper, which could be transported wherever and read whenever. The data indicates that the popularity of the newspaper – the newspaper as a medium itself, not one specific paper – peaked in the 1940s. Though the numbers obviously began to decline after the peak, the rapid growth of the American population saw the circulation numbers continue to rise.³⁴ The market penetration of newspapers was so great that, until the 1970s, each American household received one, on average. Starting in the 1970s, that number began to decline, falling below one newspaper per household to the figures of today, which rests somewhere around one newspaper for every two

³⁴ The percentage of Americans reading newspapers peaked in the 1940's. This percentage began to decline after the 1940's, but the inflation of the American population still meant that circulation numbers began to rise. For example: if 75% of all 1,000,000 Americans read the newspaper in 1949 that would mean that 750,000 Americans read the newspaper. Now if that percentage were to decrease in 1950 to 70%, but the population increased to 1,100,000, that would result in 770,000 Americans reading the newspaper; a net increase of 20,000 subscribers regardless of the 5% decrease in total percentage of the population.

households.³⁵ These numbers show that the newspaper was one of the primary sources of information in the twentieth century, and that the information it provided would be consumed based on its popularity alone.

Unique media coverage was provided by blacks reporting on their own race. Television and radio were still early mediums. The first black-owned radio stations did not appear until the late 1940s.³⁶ The first all-sports television channel did not begin to broadcast until the late 1970s. Despite each of these technologies growing quickly, they remained expensive and, thus, elusive to many people, tempering the effect they had on the general public – especially the black demographic, many of whom lived below the poverty line.

Unlike radio and television, newspapers owned and operated by blacks – simplistically known as “black newspapers” – have a long history in America.³⁷ Though these newspapers appeared in their infancy in the early nineteenth century, the advent of the twentieth century saw the creation and rise of a number of important and widespread black newspapers, prominent among them the *Atlanta Daily World*, *Chicago Defender*, *Pittsburgh Courier*, the *New York Amsterdam News*, and the *Philadelphia Tribune*. Although the black press was not nearly as prevalent as the white press, there remained large black newspapers that were disseminated throughout the country.

The newspaper was, without question, the primary information medium during the careers of Louis and Ali. Television was relatively new and expensive. Radios were mildly expensive, their range was limited, and the radio itself was limited to a concrete location. The newspaper, however, was affordable and ambulatory: it could be purchased and carried nearly anywhere. The newspaper was also a chimera of news and public opinion. Letters to the editor, special interests, local news, global news, coverage of major events; the newspaper covered everything. What made newspapers more appealing than the radio was that “you never missed anything.” All the information the newspaper had was available instantaneously. The propensity

³⁵ “State of the News Media 2004: Audience,” Project for Excellence in Journalism, accessed 19 March 2014, <http://stateofthemediamedia.org/2004/newspapers-intro/audience/>. Both statistics (newspapers per household pre- and post-1970) were found through this source.

³⁶ “African Americans and Early Radio,” Donna Halper, accessed 19 March 2014, <http://www.digitaldeliftp.com/LookAround/aaer.htm>.

³⁷ The body of knowledge on the topic presents a variety of descriptive names for the black press: the black press, the Black Press, the negro press, the Negro Press. The black press, in turn, produces black newspapers: Black newspapers, negro newspapers, Negro newspapers, and African-American newspapers. For the sake of simplicity and consistency, as far as this study is concerned, the black press produces black newspapers.

(and some may argue necessity) for reader feedback helped to shape the newspaper. Letters to the editor columns could not have existed had readers not taken the time to write. A decreasing fiscal burden in producing a newspaper allowed more opinions to become published and, in turn, read and shared. Financial stabilization remained tied to subscribers and advertisers, allowing the newspaper to specialize content commensurate to their audience. The result was the principle of publishing news and interest items prompted by the whim of the reading public, catering to the popular news of the day while also reporting on issues pertinent to the reader base, each being intertwined on numerous occasions.

Joe Louis and Muhammad Ali fought in the ring at the time when other men were fighting for racial equality and civil rights. Newspapers reported abundantly on each. Conventional wisdom tells us that the boxing career of each man had importance in the arenas of civil rights and race relations, but the question remains unanswered as to whether blacks contemporary to the careers of each of these boxers believed that these men were competing in the same arenas.

SECONDARY SOURCES

Joe Louis

Joe Louis' life has received considerable literary treatment. His autobiography, *Joe Louis: My Life*, was published in 1978.³⁸ It was the standard autobiographical fare: an unfettered look into the life of the subject. Ten years following, Louis' son, Joseph Louis Barrow Jr. published *Joe Louis: 50 Years An American Hero*.³⁹ It was Louis' son's way of reaffirming his father's legacy, a legacy which often feels lost among the other black heroes that came after Louis. The book is interesting because it splits time between a synopsis and analysis of Louis' life, and between interviews the author conducted with those who played a significant role in Louis' life. The interview subjects are wide-ranging and interesting: Joe Louis' family and

³⁸ Joe Louis, Edna Rust, and Art Rust Jr., *Joe Louis: My Life* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978). This "autobiography" was – like many other athlete autobiographies – likely ghost-written or dictated. Louis spent much of his school life attending trade and technical schools, working with his hands. For him to write an autobiography, especially three years before his death in 1981, would have been unlikely. The nature of the relationship between the Rusts and Louis is not elaborated on in the book, either. Art Rust Jr. was a sports broadcaster, historian, and author, who wrote a number of books, notably on baseball. Some of the books were co-written with his wife, Edna.

³⁹ Joe Louis Barrow Jr. and Barbara Munder. *Joe Louis: 50 Years An American Hero*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1988.

wives, generic fans, former adversaries, a President, entertainers, and other people of note who were “touched” by Louis’ career.

Gerald Astor wrote one of the first biographies on Joe Louis: “...*And A Credit to His Race*.”⁴⁰ Published in 1974, the book has no index, cites no sources, but covers the entirety of Louis’ life. Many other authors have followed in Astor’s footsteps, writing biographies of Louis. In 1985, Chris Mead wrote one of the first scholarly biographies of Louis. Titled *Champion – Joe Louis: Black Hero in White America*, it was well-written, expertly cited, and excerpted in *Sports Illustrated* shortly after its initial publication, no doubt giving it an increase in popularity and visibility.⁴¹ It stands as one of the best biographical works on Louis’ life. In 2010 Randy Roberts, noted sport historian and boxing aficionado, added to the scholarly biographical treatments of Louis with *Joe Louis: Hard Times Man*.⁴² Like Mead’s book, Roberts’ work is expertly sourced and written, a pleasure to read.

Many books about Joe Louis forewent the biography and instead focused on the impact of his fight – or fights – with Max Schmeling in the 1930s. The title of these books do not belie their content: *The Greatest Fight of Our Generation*⁴³; *The Fight of the Century*⁴⁴; *Beyond Glory: Joe Louis vs. Max Schmeling, and a World on the Brink*⁴⁵; *Joe Louis: The Great Black Hope*⁴⁶. This is also the character of many of the papers and journal articles written on Joe Louis. A cursory sample of the literature on Louis leaves one distinct impression: his big fights, primarily the Louis-Schmeling bouts, are the measuring stick by which his career is analyzed. Though Thomas Hietala’s *The Fight of the Century* deals more with Joe Louis’ life as he struggles through racial inequality on the heels of Jack Johnson, it is framed by the Schmeling bouts.

There have been many monographs produced on Louis’ “fight of the decade/century,” and most of the journal articles published fall into the same category. Indeed, much of the work

⁴⁰ Gerald Astor, “...*And a Credit to His Race*.” *The Hard Life and Times of Joseph Louis Barrow a.k.a. Joe Louis* (New York: Saturday Review Press, 1974).

⁴¹ Chris Mead, *Champion – Joe Louis: Black Hero in White America* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1985).

⁴² Randy Roberts, *Joe Louis: Hard Times Man* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).

⁴³ Lewis A. Erenberg, *The Greatest Fight of Our Generation: Louis vs. Schmeling* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

⁴⁴ Thomas R. Hietala, *The Fight of the Century: Jack Johnson, Joe Louis, and the Struggle for Racial Equality* (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 2002).

⁴⁵ David Margolick, *Beyond Glory: Joe Louis vs. Max Schmeling, and a World on the Brink* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005).

⁴⁶ Richard Bak, *Joe Louis: The Great Black Hope* (Dallas: Taylor Publishing, 1996).

that has been done to analyze the career and life of Louis has been done in journal article or essay format. The shorter length tends to allow the writer to treat only lightly the biographical information and proceed straight to analysis of the topic. Art Evans wrote from a sociological perspective on how Joe Louis was viewed and reacted to by whites. He positions Louis as a “key functionary” – an actor performing crucial activities for the total system – but points out that Louis’ race was always at the forefront of America’s consciousness; or while he was doing great things for the country – i.e. defeating Schmeling and Nazism – he was still black.⁴⁷ Jeffrey Sammons wrote on the southern reaction to Joe Louis. He points out that much of Louis’ success was as a symbol, and not a man. When Louis retired in 1951, he was quickly forgotten in the South, merely sandwiched in between two great white champions in Jack Dempsey and Rocky Marciano, and his history was denigrated and forgotten over time.⁴⁸ Lane Demas wrote on the Louis-Schmeling bouts and how Louis was cast as an American hero. Louis was important to the formation of American patriotic sentiment in the lead-up to World War Two as well as a spokesman for the aspirations of the black community.⁴⁹ Lauren Sklaroff wrote about how Joe Louis was used by America during World War Two to foster better race relations. Louis was viewed as an intermediary step in the ladder of acceptance; his job was not necessarily to assault barriers but rather foster white acceptance of the black community.⁵⁰ Robert Drake wrote on the effect Louis had in the South with his fights against Schmeling. He concluded that, despite Louis’ accomplishments, much remained unchanged in the South.⁵¹ Graduate theses have also been published on the topic.⁵² In books that David K. Wiggins, noted sport historian, published on the topic of blacks and athletics, he included numerous pieces on Joe Louis.⁵³

⁴⁷ Art Evans, “Joe Louis as a Key Functionary: White Reactions Toward a Black Champion,” *Journal of Black Studies* 16, no. 1 (1985): 95-111.

⁴⁸ Jeffrey T. Sammons, “Boxing as a Reflection of Society: The Southern Reaction to Joe Louis,” *Journal of Popular Culture* 16, no. 4 (1983): 23-33.

⁴⁹ Lane Demas, “The Brown Bomber’s Dark Day: Louis-Schmeling I and America’s Black Hero,” *Journal of Sport History* 31, no. 3 (2004): 253-271.

⁵⁰ Lauren Rebecca Sklaroff, “Constructing G.I. Joe Louis: Cultural Solutions to the ‘Negro Problem’ During World War II,” *Journal of American History* 89, no. 3 (2002): 958-983.

⁵¹ Robert Drake, “Joe Louis, the Southern Press, and the ‘Fight of the Century,’” *Sport History Review* 43 (2012): 1-17.

⁵² Priscilla Anne Dowden, “Joe Louis: Culture Hero in African-America, 1934-1944.” MPS diss., Cornell University, 1987. Priscilla Dowden wrote her dissertation on Joe Louis as a culture hero for blacks during his first decade of fighting. Jessica Lynn Graham, “Hitler’s Nazism, Sport, and Joe Louis: Racism vs. Pseudo-Democracy in America,” MPS diss., Cornell University, 2000. Jessica Graham wrote about Joe Louis for her doctoral dissertation as well, examining the role that Louis played in America with Hitler’s Nazism bearing down on the world.

⁵³ Theresa E. Runstedtler, “In Sports the Best Man Wins: How Joe Louis Whipped Jim Crow,” in *Sport in America, Volume II: From Colonial Leisure to Celebrity Figures and Globalization*, 2nd ed, ed. David K. Wiggins

Through all the literature on Louis, there still exists a small gap which this study addresses. While many of the books and articles have made use of newspapers as a primary source, they have not made it their fundamental source. This study seeks to discern meaning specifically via what was written in newspapers and nothing else. The privilege of hindsight is avoided. Instead, I opt for direct analysis of newspaper content for changing or stagnating sentiments.

Muhammad Ali

In the introduction to his 2009 book *Muhammad Ali: The Making of An Icon*, Michael Ezra states that “for almost thirty years, Muhammad Ali has held the Guinness World Record as the most written-about person in history.”⁵⁴ If one were to go to a library or book store, they would no doubt accept this fact at face value. There exists a vast corpus of literature written on Muhammad Ali from many angles.

Ali’s autobiography is interesting because it concludes just after his last fight with Joe Frazier, the “Thrilla in Manila.”⁵⁵ The book ends with a two-page chapter on the fight, with Ali admitting that his publishers are hurrying him to phone in the final chapter so that they can include it with the book. Ali neglects to write the requested chapter, opting instead to praise Frazier as an opponent and reaffirm his own place as “The Greatest.”⁵⁶ Aside from that, this is a book written by Ali to focus more on his personal life than his career in the ring. The two are obviously intertwined, but Ali spends much more time elaborating on events outside the ring.

(Champaign: Human Kinetics, 2010), 221-255; William H. Wiggins Jr., “Joe Louis: American Folk Hero,” in *Sport and the Color Line: Black Athletes and Race Relations in Twentieth-Century America*, ed. Patrick B. Miller et. al., (New York: Routledge, 2004), 127-146; Richard Wright, “High Tide in Harlem: Joe Louis as a Symbol of Freedom,” in *The Unlevel Playing Field: A Documentary History of the African American Experience in Sport*, ed. David K. Wiggins et. al. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 169-174.

⁵⁴ Michael Ezra, *Muhammad Ali: The Making of an Icon* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2009), 1. This fact, while interesting and incredibly appropriate with regards to this study, is difficult to verify. Ezra wrote in 2009, thirty years after Ali’s retirement in 1981. The Guinness Book of Records, or whatever you would like to call its depository of “facts” nowadays, has become quite the tangle of pseudo-records, preferring to present gross, funny, or bombastic records instead of legitimate ones worthy of consideration. Thus, while interesting, this fact could not be verified.

⁵⁵ Muhammad Ali and Richard Durham, *The Greatest: My Own Story*, (New York: Random House, 1975).

⁵⁶ The reason for this – Ali’s autobiography being published before his retirement – was money. When Ali had his boxing license suspended, he could not work and earn money plying his trade. Never one for fiscal responsibility, he found himself in dire financial straits. The Nation of Islam had abandoned him when he said he wanted to return to the ring, and thus he lost the one organization which would have been likely to support him in his time of need. He engaged in speaking tours which paid him some money, and sold the rights to his autobiography for a handsome sum.

Following the pattern of material on Joe Louis, material on Ali branches out from autobiography to biography, notably by those close to Ali's life. Ferdie Pacheco was a physician and the cornerman for Muhammad Ali during his fight career. In 1992, he published *Muhammad Ali: A View from the Corner*.⁵⁷ It is largely what would be expected: Pacheco's point of view on different aspects of Ali's life, a sort of "all access pass" to things we would not have otherwise been privy to. Thomas Hauser's *Muhammad Ali: His Life and Times*, was an oral history, not unlike the one published by Joe Louis' son. As Ali's wife, Lonnie, attested, the aim of Hauser's oral history was "understanding:" "I want people to understand who Muhammad is, what he stands for, and what he's accomplished throughout his life."⁵⁸ It covers much of his life – during his career and after – and can be considered a biographical work. Stephen Brunt, a Canadian sportswriter and journalist, wrote *Facing Ali*, a series of interviews conducted with opponents of Ali.⁵⁹ Each chapter is devoted to an opponent, evaluating how their lives were affected by facing Ali. Of the many generic biographies on Ali, one of the best is David Remnick's *King of the World: Muhammad Ali and the Rise of an American Hero*.⁶⁰ It is a thorough, detached account of Ali's life and career with the focus beginning in the aftermath of his fight with Floyd Patterson. To celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of Ali capturing the heavyweight title, Sportsnet Magazine – the magazine of a popular Canadian sports network – released a collector's edition commemorating the life and career of Ali.⁶¹

The majority of the literature on Ali seems to follow a path of pseudo-biography/critical examination. There is a lot of overlap in the literature that tends to follow the model of presenting Ali's life biographically, then analyzing specific aspects throughout. Usually, most of the works have a specific spin. In 1971, Budd Schulberg published *Loser and Still Champion: Muhammad Ali*.⁶² Schulberg deals with the aftermath of Ali-Frazier I and, as the title suggests, holds that Ali, despite losing, is still a champion because of other aspects of his life. Charles Lemert, a sociologist, writes less on boxing and more on Ali's cultural impact. In *Muhammad Ali: Trickster in the Culture of Irony* Lemert focuses on Ali's religious life and ties.⁶³ Howard

⁵⁷ Ferdie Pacheco, *Muhammad Ali: A View From the Corner*, (New York: Carol Publishing Group, 1992).

⁵⁸ Thomas Hauser, *Muhammad Ali: His Life and Times* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991), 9.

⁵⁹ Stephen Brunt, *Facing Ali: The Opposition Weighs In*, (Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002).

⁶⁰ David Remnick, *King of the World: Muhammad Ali and the Rise of an American Hero* (New York: Random House, 1998).

⁶¹ "Ali: 50th Anniversary Collectors Edition," *Sportsnet Magazine*, February 2014.

⁶² Budd Schulberg, *Loser and Still Champion: Muhammad Ali*, (Garden City: Doubleday, 1972).

⁶³ Charles Lemert, *Muhammad Ali: Trickster in the Culture of Irony* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003).

Bingham and Max Wallace's *Muhammad Ali's Greatest Fight: Cassius Clay vs. the United States of America* is an interesting book and one of the best for examining the effect of Ali's career outside the ring.⁶⁴ As the subtitle suggests, it deals primarily with Ali's political activity and the opposition he faced from the American people and government. It is well researched, presented chronologically in a biographical format, and a pleasure to read. In books on blacks and athletics that David K. Wiggins, noted sport historian, edited and published – *The Unlevel Playing Field: A Documentary History of the African American Experience in Sport; Sport in America, Volume II: From Colonial Leisure to Celebrity Figures and Globalization; Sport and the Color Line: Black Athletes and Race Relations in Twentieth-Century America* – he saw fit to include material on Ali.⁶⁵

One form of literature presented on Ali – one that is missing from the career of Louis – is the critique. These works tend to be much more interesting than most of the non-scholarly biographies because they dispense with the basic biographical narrative and seek to analyze Ali in a sociological light. Jack Cashill's *Sucker Punch: The Hard Left Hook that Dazed Ali and Killed King's Dream* is one of the most fascinating books published on Ali.⁶⁶ Rather than praise Ali's actions, as many often do, Cashill is critical of Ali's choices. In a field of study where its members pride themselves on thinking critically, this work on Ali breaks with the long tradition of mindless praise and deconstructs the life and impact of Ali. This book is reminiscent of Mark Kram's *Ghosts of Manila*, a critical look at the Frazier-Ali feud from the side of Joe Frazier.⁶⁷ Michael Ezra understands the vast literature written on Ali, and is very open about it in his

⁶⁴ Howard Bingham and Max Wallace, *Muhammad Ali's Greatest Fight: Cassius Clay vs. the United States of America*, (New York: M. Evans and Company, Inc., 2000).

⁶⁵ Eldridge Cleaver, "The Muhammad Ali-Patterson Fight," in *The Unlevel Playing Field: A Documentary History of the African American Experience in Sport*, ed. David K. Wiggins et. al. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 303-306; "Elijah Muhammad Disciplines Muhammad Ali," in *The Unlevel Playing Field: A Documentary History of the African American Experience in Sport*, ed. David K. Wiggins et. al. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 306-309; "Muhammad Ali Faces the Nation," in *The Unlevel Playing Field: A Documentary History of the African American Experience in Sport*, ed. David K. Wiggins et. al. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 310-314; David K. Wiggins, "Victory for Allah: Muhammad Ali, the Nation of Islam, and American Society," in *Sport in America, Volume II: From Colonial Leisure to Celebrity Figures and Globalization*, 2nd ed, ed. David K. Wiggins (Champaign: Human Kinetics, 2010), 335-357; David W. Zang, "The Greatest: Muhammad Ali's Confounding Character," in *Sport and the Color Line: Black Athletes and Race Relations in Twentieth-Century America*, ed. Patrick B. Miller et. al. (New York: Routledge, 2004), 289-303.

⁶⁶ Jack Cashill, *Sucker Punch: The Hard Left Hook that Dazed Ali and Killed King's Dream* (Nashville: Nelson Current, 2006).

⁶⁷ Mark Kram, *Ghosts of Manila: The Fateful Blood Feud Between Muhammad Ali and Joe Frazier* (New York: Harper Collins, 2001).

introduction titled “Why Another Book about Muhammad Ali?”⁶⁸ Ezra instead writes about Ali’s pre-championship boxing matches, career management, and current legacy, foregoing the traditional biography or big fight analysis. Like Kram and Cashill, Ezra, too, is critical of Ali, rather than accepting Ali as “The Greatest” at face value.

Like the literature on Joe Louis, there exists very little written about Ali based on newspapers as the primary source material. This study, as with the rest of the literature, will seek to provide analysis and meaning to Ali’s career, but will do so with the aid of primary source material in the form of a black newspaper.

⁶⁸ Ezra, *Muhammad Ali: The Making of an Icon*.

CHAPTER 2

The Life and Times of Joe Louis

During his athletic prime, Joseph Louis Barrow was the best known and most admired black man on earth. There had been black men in America before the Great Depression of the 1930s who made incalculable contributions – Crispus Attucks, Nat Turner, Frederick Douglass, W.E.B. DuBois, Booker T. Washington, among others. But their contributions notwithstanding, in the main they were known only by name and deeds, and herein lies the power of sports in black life.

-- Arthur R. Ashe Jr.¹

THE STATE OF THE ART

Boxing resides in the earliest pantheon of sport, sharing an illustrious spotlight with the likes of wrestling and the footrace. Though the origins of boxing – like most early sport – are impossible to trace, the Greeks were one of the first to place the sport on a high level. As far back as 688 B.C.E. the Greeks introduced boxing into the Olympics, competing with rules and honouring the winners as champions. The Romans borrowed the sport from the Greeks and brutalized it. Bouts often became battles to the death. Interest in the sport dwindled during the Christian era and by the 4th century C.E., the sport was abolished in Rome.²

¹ Joe Louis Barrow Jr. and Barbara Munder. *Joe Louis: 50 Years An American Hero* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1988), xv.

² John Durant, *The Heavyweight Champions*, 5th ed. (New -York: Hastings House, 1973), 1.

For centuries following, boxing existed only in historic memory. Ultimately, the sport revived itself. In England, James Figg was one of the earliest known fist-fighters in the formal rebirth of pugilism. He opened a pugilistic academy in London in 1719. This early form of boxing was very different from the sweet science we know today: there were no written rules, and it was in the style of “no-holds-barred” with almost anything being legal, including kneeling a man and hitting him while he was down. It could be seen as similar to modern mixed martial arts, with fewer rules and no structure to the contest except “last man standing wins.”³

James Figg was succeeded by Jack Broughton, who can be thought of as one of the early fathers of modern boxing. He ran a boxing school in London, where he taught self-defense and took on all comers, similar to Figg. He brought defensive tactics to boxing, and punched from the shoulder, rather than using the swinging blows popular at the time. Broughton’s greatest contribution to boxing, however, was the set of rules he created in 1743. They outlawed many of the brutal practices used – like hitting below the belt and striking a man while down – and structured a system of rounds with a thirty second break in between. These rounds, however, were not timed like we know them today: they ended only on a knock-down. This could come via strikes or above-the-waist grapples. When a round ended, a man retreated to – or was dragged to – his corner, where he had thirty seconds to return from his corner to a mark or scratch in the centre of the ring to face his opponent. This is where the popular idioms “toe the mark” or “up to scratch” originate. Broughton’s rules, initially written to be used in his own arena, were met with such favour that they were used widely for more than 90 years. The London Prize Ring Rules – essentially the same as Broughton’s rules – eventually superseded Broughton’s code.⁴ The London Prize Ring Rules were developed in 1838, revised in 1853, and were used through 1889.⁵

At some point in time, boxing migrated across the Atlantic to America. It likely came from England with the sons of wealthy southern families, who visited the mother country for their education. The first prize fights were between black slaves forced to fight for entertainment and gambling purposes. Boxing, however, remained largely in the English sphere, with any decent American fighters travelling there to test their skill. Though rules were set out, the sport

³ Durant, 1-2.

⁴ Durant, 4-6.

⁵ Nat Fleischer, *The Heavyweight Championship: An Informal History of Heavyweight Boxing from 1719 to the Present Day* (London: Putman & Company Ltd., 1949), 280.

was still divided. Many fights were of the bare-knuckle variety, bloody affairs.⁶

In 1867, the Marquess of Queensbury rules were published. These rules were named for John Sholto Douglas, the Marquess of Queensbury, but were written by John Graham Chambers, Welshman and member of the British Amateur Athletic Club. Convention of the times forced Chambers to find a noble patron willing to lend his name to the rules. The Marquess agreed to lend his name and thus gained a lasting fame as the writer of the code that still largely governs the sport of the boxing.⁷ The Queensbury Rules dictated measures for glove-fighting that outlawed all wrestling and created three-minute rounds followed by a one-minute rest. When a man was knocked down, instead of ending the round, he would be given ten seconds to regain his feet, or else be counted out of the fight as the victim of a “knockout.” Naturally, the adoption of these rules was slow, but they eventually took precedence over all others. The sport, however, fell into disrepute. Crooked fights and intimidation tactics pushed boxing under a dark cloud.⁸

In the late nineteenth century, John L. Sullivan emerged to raise boxing out of the doldrums. A man who wanted nothing to do with fixed fights, he took on all comers and only cared for victory. As Durant put it, “John L. was America’s first great sports hero, the first to be followed on the streets by crowds and to need guards to keep off admiring mobs.” When Sullivan fought and defeated Jack Kilrain in 1889, it was the last bare-knuckle boxing match. This fight ended England’s boxing supremacy and Sullivan claimed the world heavyweight championship of boxing as American property. This also signaled the final time a championship would be contested under the London Prize Ring Rules.⁹

John L. Sullivan’s victory and capture of the heavyweight championship produced a new order in boxing. This new order produced a new breed of boxer: fighters that had never participated in the bare-knuckle age. These new fighters stressed speed, skill, and science over brute power. The first fighter of this new generation to win any repute was Jim Corbett. He defeated John L. Sullivan and, with a victory over the English heavyweight champion Charley Mitchell, became America’s first undisputed world champion.¹⁰

Corbett was later beaten by Bob Fitzsimmons, relinquishing his title. Fitzsimmons,

⁶ Durant, 6-20.

⁷ Fleischer, 283-284.

⁸ Durant, 20.

⁹ Durant, 21-28.

¹⁰ Durant, 30-38.

however, chose a poor matchup in his first defense and lost the title to Jim Jeffries. Jeffries defeated Corbett in a title defense, and subsequently took on all comers who deserved a shot. This period featuring Corbett, Fitzsimmons, and Jeffries, came to be known as the “Golden Age of the American Ring,” and lasted from approximately 1895 to 1905.¹¹ All of these men were white. Though boxing in America was relatively young, there were very few black fighters of any repute. Peter Jackson was one of the few black boxers competing in the upper ranks, but he was never given a title shot. Jackson fought Jim Corbett when John L. Sullivan refused him a title bout. Jackson also fought Jeffries, but the fight took place before Jeffries was champion. Early boxing saw very few interracial bouts; many black athletes were rebuffed by the “colour line” that had been drawn by white fighters. Other black boxers, such as Joe Jeannette, Sam McVey, Sam Langford, and Harry Wills were forced to fight one another under terrible conditions for meager purses. Though nothing concrete may have precipitated it, the fact remained that the colour line existed in boxing, and whites roundly refused to box blacks.¹²

Jeffries continued his dominance in the field, defeating all comers until 1904, when he retired undefeated. Jeffries named a new champion in his stead, and promised never to fight again.¹³ The new champion that Jeffries named was Marvin Hart. Hart lost the championship to Tommy Burns. Fans and boxing authorities, however, did not accept Burns as the champion – nor did they truly accept Hart – so Burns set out to prove his pedigree by taking on all comers, even going so far as to fighting two men, back-to-back – and knocking out both in the first round. With the Golden Age over, Burns found little talent available, save for two black boxers named Jack Johnson and Sam Langford. Burns believed he could make more money fighting elsewhere, so he took his championship on a world tour, becoming a sort of “pugilistic gypsy.” Jack Johnson, however, was unrelenting. Believing he deserved a title fight, he followed Burns wherever he went. Johnson’s tenacity eventually paid off: Burns’ desire to take on all comers and prove his championship pedigree led to him abolish the colour line and fight Johnson. On 26 December 1908, in Sydney, Australia, Jack Johnson defeated Tommy Burns and became the first black heavyweight champion of the world.¹⁴

¹¹ Durant, 39-51.

¹² Jeffrey T. Sammons, *Beyond the Ring: The Role of Boxing in American Society* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 73-74.

¹³ Durant, 51.

¹⁴ Durant, 51-57.

America at the turn of the 20th century was not a place renowned for its racial equality. Jack Johnson's heavyweight title distinction caused a social backlash. As a boxer, though, few could argue his skill. In his 1949 informal history of boxing, noted ring historian Nat Fleischer spoke favourably of Johnson's boxing acumen: "After years devoted to the study of heavyweight fighters, I have no hesitation naming Jack Johnson as the greatest of them all. He possessed every asset;" "in all-around ability, he was tops."¹⁵ Though Fleischer wrote this in 1949, it was still an impressive assessment of Johnson's talents. A great counter-puncher, master of the feint, always well balanced: there was little you could dislike involving Johnson's ring acumen.

Johnson's behavior outside the ring, however, was not as impressive as his boxing ability. Jack Johnson, mincing few words, was a controversial character of the first order. He wore flashy clothes, owned flashy automobiles, drove them at high speeds, constantly ran afoul of the law, and loved white women. Combined with his general appearance as the perfect caricature of a black man – notably his big, toothy, gold-toothed grin – Johnson was a man that was an easy target for white audiences.¹⁶ When Jack London, writer for the *New York Herald*, wrote on the results of the Burns-Johnson fight, the charge he included surprised no one: "But one thing now remains. Jim Jeffries must now emerge from his alfalfa farm and remove that golden smile from Jack Johnson's face. Jeff, it's up to you. The White Man must be rescued." With that sentiment echoed throughout the rest of America, the search for the "Great White Hope" began.¹⁷

It is fitting to end this survey chapter with an explanation of the search for the Great White Hope. With many believing the pride of the white race was at stake, Jeffries was finally lured out of retirement to fight Johnson. At the age of thirty-five, Jeffries had to lose sixty-five pounds to step into the ring. Looking like a fighter was enough for ring experts and sports writers to give him the advantage, with gamblers giving him ten-to-seven odds to win. In what was dubbed as "The Fight of the Century," Jeffries was a shell of his former self and was soundly defeated by Jack Johnson. Reactions – some peaceful, some violent, all racial – quickly followed in America.¹⁸

To quickly cover boxing history between the Jeffries-Johnson tilt and the beginning of Joe Louis' career, Johnson would eventually be defeated, losing his title in 1915 to Jess Willard,

¹⁵ Fleischer, 153.

¹⁶ Durant, 57-58

¹⁷ Randy Roberts, *Papa Jack: Jack Johnson and the Era of White Hopes* (New York: The Free Press, 1983), 68.

¹⁸ Durant, 59-60.

a white man. Willard lost his title to the Manassa Mauler, Jack Dempsey. Dempsey would fought Georges Carpentier in 1921 in the first million-dollar gate in boxing history, which drew the largest audience ever noted: 80,000 people. Two years later, Dempsey fought the Argentine, Luis Angel Firpo, producing the second million-dollar gate and drawing 85,000. Dempsey later lost his title to Gene Tunney in 1926, in a fight that drew 120,000 spectators. A year later, the Tunney-Dempsey return match drew 100,000 people and \$2,658,660 in gate receipts. In a tightly contested and controversial bout, Tunney won the rematch. Tunney-Dempsey II brought an end to one of greatest ages of boxing.¹⁹

If the “Golden Age of the American Ring” had come and gone, succeeded by another “Golden Age” that peaked with the two Tunney-Dempsey fights, then what followed was almost certainly a dark age for boxing. The six years that followed before Joe Louis’ professional debut saw Max Schmeling, Jack Sharkey, Primo Carnera, and Max Baer hold the heavyweight title. With Tunney vacating his title upon his retirement, a tournament was organized to decide the next champion. Schmeling and Sharkey met in the final; Schmeling came away the victor on a controversial foul called on Sharkey. Old Jim Corbett, who attended the fight, was disgruntled by the result: “Boxing will never recover from this smear.” In the rematch, Sharkey was this time the benefactor of yet another controversial finish, being given the decision over Schmeling. Primo Carnera – in the clutches of New York gangsters and the product of many a fixed fight – “defeated” Sharkey in a match that many believed was fixed as well. Carnera met Max Baer, who knocked him down a record twelve times en route to a knockout victory and the title. Three hundred-and-sixty-four days later, Baer lost the title to James J. Braddock, the last man to hold the title before Joe Louis.²⁰

With the survey of boxing history preceding Joe Louis – and Muhammad Ali, for that matter – out of the way, there are three important things to note: the “Great White Hope,” the magnitude of the world heavyweight boxing championship, and the doldrums of boxing after Tunney-Dempsey II. Boxing found itself in indelible decline following the retirements of Tunney and Dempsey. Dempsey was the biggest star the sport had seen at the time; attendance and gate receipts reflected this. His bouts with Tunney are some of the most memorable of all time, and the public was outraged when Dempsey retired before a third Tunney-Dempsey fight

¹⁹ Durant, 65-82.

²⁰ Durant, 63-98.

could be arranged. The sport ached for a marquee champion like years past. Not only could it not produce a legitimately dominant champion, but most of the title fights that proceeded Tunney-Dempsey II had been controversial. To make matters worse, the Great Depression was wreaking havoc on the country. Not only did the public have no desire for a sub-par boxing match, neither could they afford it. Other forms of entertainment, notably movies, began appearing to help the nation take its mind off its ills, something that boxing had accomplished only a few years prior.²¹ Boxing was faced with two options: find a new champion and produce exciting fights, or drift into irrelevance.

Despite this, boxing still remained one of the most popular sports in America. More than a sport, though, it became a part of life. It was talked about, written about, reported on; it pervaded everyday life on a level most other sports could and did not. The reason for the attraction is inconsequential: the attraction existed, and it was an intense attraction. Take, for instance, Stanley Weston's introduction to his book, *The Heavyweight Champions*:

Among the crowns worn regally throughout the world, perhaps the one most honored has been that given by the world at large to the man who wins its plaudits in competition, the man who proves he is the heavyweight boxing champion of the world.

The spectacle of one man proving his superiority over another is the world's oldest entertainment – the world's premier sport. For most of us, we lesser men, we might see in these champions the man we wish ourselves to be. Psychologists insist that the magnet of boxing is a vicarious attraction, that the honors we heap on champions are honors we would have strewn before ourselves; and it may be so. But it does not make the picture fade.

There is an electricity that courses through a crowd in an arena on the night that the heavyweight championship is being defended in the ring. Will there be a new champion? Will there be a new king?²²

This is no anomaly. Boxing and the heavyweight championship appeals to people the world over, including mass appeal in America. Steven A. Reiss theorized, “the sport that probably best fit in with the urban slum environment was pugilism.” He would go on to state that “for boys who lacked more traditional means of advancement, boxing had long been an escape from the

²¹ Howard Bingham and Max Wallace, *Muhammad Ali's Greatest Fight: Cassius Clay vs. the United States of America* (New York: M. Evans and Company, Inc., 2000): 40.

²² Stanley Weston, *The Heavyweight Champions* (New York: Ace Publishing Corporation, 1970), 7.

slums.”²³ America was built on principles similar to those espoused in the boxing ring. America was a country that was no stranger to the “urban slum environment” in the late 1800s and early 1900s, thus it was quick to embrace boxing as one of its beloved pastimes and anoint its champions as their heroes.

The world heavyweight championship is a respected institution because the sport of boxing is loved by the common people. The secret to the success of boxing lays tied in its bond shared between those fighting and those spectating, according to Dr. Charles P. Larson, former president of the World Boxing Association:

This oldest of human sports has virtually disappeared from the public eye from time to time, a victim to reformers or lawmakers or ineptitude in its own management.

But just when it seemed doomed to permanent obscurity it would bounce back for another era of prosperity, leaving new names etched on the roster of ring greats.

The reason for this durability is quite simple: Boxing appeals to the primitive instincts of man. Beneath this veneer is the cave man, the man of violence and aggression. These basic instincts may be hidden by a cloak of timidity, or by inhibitions developed during a lifetime. But they are there. The boxer himself has a physical outlet for the urge to violence, while the spectator gets his thrill vicariously, surrendering to an empathy involving one of the combatants he is cheering for.²⁴

The “Great White Hope” era is important to this study because it characterized the way the sport and America felt about black athletes. When Jack Johnson won the world heavyweight championship, America was in an uproar. In 1913, with no “White Hope” having defeated Jack Johnson, he was found guilty of violating the “Mann Act;” retroactively charged and convicted under dubious circumstances.²⁵ Rather than face a prison sentence, Johnson fled the country. He

²³ Steven A. Reiss, *City Games: The Evolution of American Urban Society and the Rise of Sports* (Urbana: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 109-110.

²⁴ John D. McCallum, *The World Heavyweight Boxing Championship* (Radnor: Chilton Book Company, 1974), vii.

²⁵ The Mann Act, also known as the White Slave Traffic Act, was passed into federal law on 25 June 1910. The law was written to prevent the transport of women across state lines for prostitution or other immoral purposes. Initially, a case was made against Johnson with regard to his relationship with Lucille Cameron. The case fell apart, however, when Cameron refused to cooperate with authorities, ultimately marrying Johnson at the end of 1912 and securing the fact that she would not testify against her husband. The second and more successful attempt at trying Johnson under the Mann Act was done so with regard to his relationship with Belle Schreiber. Whereas Cameron was a woman of no ill repute, Schreiber was a prostitute. Johnson argued that his relationship with Schreiber, however, was that of lovers, not prostitute and client. Though they travelled across state lines, to do so as lovers was not

was forced to fight Willard in Havana, Cuba. After losing, Johnson claimed that he threw the fight because the United States government had promised it would overlook his prison sentence. He eventually returned to America and served a year in prison. Johnson died in an automobile crash in 1946.²⁶

It is important to understand what fueled the search for the “Great White Hope” in part to understand Joe Louis’ career, in part to understand the careers of black boxers following Jack Johnson. W.E.B Du Bois, the foremost black social critic of his day, analyzed the “Great White Hope” in a 1914 edition of *The Crisis*:

The cause is clear: Jack Johnson, successor of the Eighteenth Century John Jackson, has out-spurred an Irishman. He did it with little brutality, the utmost fairness and great good nature. He did not "knock" his opponent senseless. Apparently he did not even try. Neither he nor his race invented prize fighting or particularly like it. Why then this thrill of national disgust? Because Johnson is black. Of course, some pretend to object to Mr. Johnson's character. But we have yet to hear, in the case of white America, that marital troubles have disqualified prize fighters or ball players or even statesmen. It comes down, then, after all to this unforgivable blackness.²⁷

This concept of “unforgivable blackness” is something that persisted even after the vanquishing of Jack Johnson, and it is something that haunted Joe Louis throughout his career, even rearing itself during Muhammad Ali’s time.²⁸ They were different men fighting at different times, but they were still affected by the life of Jack Johnson. To understand Johnson and the search for the “Great White Hope” is to understand the racial climate of boxing – and sport in general – in

illegal under the Mann Act. What is more, their relationship occurred in 1909 and 1910, before the Mann Act was passed into law. This is where the “retroactive” nature of the case comes from. In June 1913, Johnson was found guilty of violating the Mann Act by an all-white jury. In essence, Johnson was largely convicted for things which, at the time, were not illegal. It should also be noted that both women – Cameron and Schreiber – were white. For a more detailed account of the charge, conviction, and proceedings, see Chapters 9 and 10 in Randy Roberts, *Papa Jack: Jack Johnson and the Era of White Hopes* (New York: The Free Press, 1983), and Chapter 10 in Geoffrey C. Ward, *Unforgivable Blackness: The Rise and Fall of Jack Johnson* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 2004).

²⁶ Durant, 61-64.

²⁷ W.E.B. Du Bois, “Editorial,” *The Crisis* 8, no. 4 (1914): 181.

²⁸ Geoffrey C. Ward published an excellent book on the life of Jack Johnson and used this concept of “unforgivable blackness” as the book’s namesake: *Unforgivable Blackness, The Rise and Fall of Jack Johnson*. For an excellent account of Jack Johnson’s life, this book stands in admirably. Other works on the life and times of Jack Johnson, the search for the “Great White Hope,” and the impact both had on boxing are Randy Roberts’ *Papa Jack: Jack Johnson and the Era of White Hopes*, Al-Tony Gilmore’s *Bad Nigger! The National Impact of Jack Johnson*, and Graeme Kent’s *The Great White Hopes: The Quest to Defeat Jack Johnson*.

contemporary America. Following Johnson's exile and defeat, the boxing establishment made sure there would be no repeat performances. Once again, the pre-Johnson tactic of the colour barrier was employed: champions simply refused to fight a black challenger. Jack Dempsey – at the behest of his promoter Tex Rickard, the man who created the atmosphere that led to the Jack Johnson riots – vowed never to step into the ring with a black man. When the New York State Athletic Commission tried to force Dempsey to fight a black contender, he instead signed to fight Tunney, moving the match to Pennsylvania. Dempsey lost to Gene Tunney, another man unwilling to face a black contender.²⁹

When Johnson won the title, it was not a watershed moment, not like Jackie Robinson breaking into the major leagues. No flood gates were opened. With title in hand, Johnson, according to the (white) public, performed contemptibly. In the words of Chris Mead, “the racist anger against Johnson had reached such a pitch that no black fighter could hope for the same opportunity that Johnson had received.”³⁰ Historian Frederic Jaher theorized that Jack Johnson, through his actions, had managed to become the “bad nigger” in an age of strident racism.³¹ It was assumed his blackness was the root cause of his bombastic personality and immoral existence. A shadow was cast by Jack Johnson – a negative shadow – and it was one that would follow black athletes and black boxers for decades to come.

THE STATE OF COLOURED AFFAIRS: EMANCIPATION TO 1952

This study would not be complete without a cursory survey of the early history of race relations and civil rights in America. President Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation on 1 January 1863 freed the slaves in the rebelling States of the American Civil War. It was not the end to racial inequality in America, but the start of a long battle. The Thirteenth Amendment was approved by Congress on 31 January 1865, permanently abolishing slavery throughout the United States.³² Slavery, however, would be replaced by Jim Crow laws and segregation in the

²⁹ Bingham and Wallace, 39-40.

³⁰ Chris Mead, *Champion – Joe Louis: Black Hero in White America* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1985), 3.

³¹ Bingham and Wallace, 39.

³² Daniel W. Aldridge III, *Becoming American: The African American Quest for Civil Rights 1861-1976* (Wheeling: Harlan Davidson, Inc., 2011), 7. For the full text of the Emancipation Proclamation, see Albert P. Blaustein and Robert L. Zangrando, eds, *Civil Rights and the Black American: A Documentary History* (New York: Simon & Schuster Inc., 1968), 196-201. For the full text of the Thirteenth Amendment, as well as the Fourteenth and Fifteenth, see Henry Steele Commager, *The Struggle for Racial Equality: A Documentary Record* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), 4-5.

American South.³³ In 1896, the United States Supreme Court voted 7-1 to uphold a Louisiana law requiring racially segregated seating in streetcars in the now-infamous *Plessy v. Ferguson* trial. In effect, America endorsed state-sponsored segregation, and “separate but equal” was spawned.³⁴

Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois followed “separate but equal,” each with their differing views on dealing with segregation and discrimination. The rise of the black press gave the black community a voice and a rallying point. The Great Migration restructured the black population of America and sent blacks in search of greener pastures and a better life.³⁵ Blacks fought as Americans in World War One, where some got a taste of a freer life in war-time America, at home and abroad.

The twentieth century had seen a slow but steady rise in racial tensions. The conciliation of Booker T. Washington gave way to the militancy of W.E.B. Du Bois. The Great Migration and the riots that resulted only exacerbated the issue. In Alabama, the Scottsboro Case of 1931 occurred during times of escalating hardships from the Great Depression, hardships that only aggravated racial tensions. The Scottsboro Case developed when nine black men were accused of rape by two white women.³⁶ The “Scottsboro Boys” were brought to trial two weeks later in a courtroom surrounded by a mob of 10,000 whites. They were found guilty of rape by an all-

³³ The most concise explanation of Jim Crow laws that I have read was provided by the Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia at Ferris State University: “Jim Crow was the name of the racial caste system which operated primarily, but not exclusively in southern and border states, between 1877 and the mid-1960s. Jim Crow was more than a series of rigid anti-black laws. It was a way of life. Under Jim Crow, African Americans were relegated to the status of second class citizens. Jim Crow represented the legitimization of anti-black racism. Many Christian ministers and theologians taught that whites were the Chosen people, blacks were cursed to be servants, and God supported racial segregation. Craniologists, eugenicists, phrenologists, and Social Darwinists, at every educational level, buttressed the belief that blacks were innately intellectually and culturally inferior to whites. Pro-segregation politicians gave eloquent speeches on the great danger of integration: the mongrelization of the white race. Newspaper and magazine writers routinely referred to blacks as niggers, coons, and darkies; and worse, their articles reinforced anti-black stereotypes. Even children's games portrayed blacks as inferior beings. All major societal institutions reflected and supported the oppression of blacks.” “What Was Jim Crow?,” Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia, accessed 26 April 2014, <http://www.ferris.edu/jimcrow/what.htm>.

³⁴ Aldridge, 46-50. For the decision, as well as dissenting opposition, from the *Plessy* case, see Commager, 29-34.

³⁵ For a detailed explanation of the Great Migration, see Chapter 4: The *Chicago Defender*.

³⁶ This glosses over many details of the case. However, this will be a consistent occurrence throughout this chapter. The point of this study is not an in-depth recounting of civil rights history in America. This information is used to provide context, so the basic details are all that require translation. For more information, the footnotes can be investigated further. The book that this information is primarily taken from is Daniel W. Aldridge III's *Becoming American: The African American Quest for Civil Rights 1861-1976*. Like the boxing survey of the previous chapter, a survey piece is used for background in this chapter. It is an excellent book and an easy read. Informative and concise, it provides plenty of information without over-analysis, and is highly recommended to anyone with a desire for deeper knowledge on the topic.

white jury, despite unsubstantial evidence. The trial was obviously a sham. In the same year, the NAACP came under the leadership of Walter White and Roy Wilkins. W.E.B. Du Bois, growing increasingly militant, began supporting segregation and the creation of separate black social and economic institutions. Walter White proved to be the right man for the job, outlasting Du Bois' increasing belligerency and committing the NAACP to fighting segregation in any form or function. In 1933, the NAACP sued the University of North Carolina in an attempt to secure Thomas Hocutt admission to its school of pharmacy. The case failed, but *Hocutt v. Wilson* became the first civil rights case that legally challenged segregated education.³⁷

Throughout the early-to-mid 1930s, blacks began shifting their political allegiances to the Democratic Party. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal administration aided civil rights leaders' efforts, even though the administration did not directly oppose segregation. This political reconstitution was one of the most important yet under-recognized factors underlying the civil rights revolution. Critics are divided on the actual merit of this political shift, and history supported that contention: initial attempts at anti-lynching legislation were consistently shelved, but Executive Order 8802 – written under threat of a 100,000-strong March on Washington – declared “there shall be no discrimination in the employment of workers in defense industries or government because of race, creed, color or national origin.”³⁸

In 1935, fascist Italy invaded Abyssinia, later known as Ethiopia. This was a precursor to the Second World War. Blacks, like most Americans, supported the war effort, but they also wanted to fight for justice at home. The Double-V campaign, started in 1942 by the *Pittsburgh Courier*, demanded “victory at home and abroad.” That same year, the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), a racially integrated group of pacifists, was established. CORE pioneered what would later come to be known as “sit-ins,” a widely used form of non-aggressive protest. As was the case in World War One, shifting black populations led to tensions among native populations of the areas the blacks settled in. The black population of Detroit doubled from 1933 to 1943, and the Detroit Riot of 1943 was one of the last large-scale urban riots. Weeks later, another riot erupted in Harlem after a white officer shot and arrested a black soldier. By the end of the war,

³⁷ Aldridge, 113-131.

³⁸ Aldridge, 131-159. See also Albert P. Blaustein and Robert L. Zangrando, eds., *Civil Rights and the Black American: A Documentary History* (New York: Simon & Schuster Inc., 1968), 358-359, for the full text of President Roosevelt's Executive Order 8802.

though positive steps had been taken, segregation remained in America.³⁹

The war in Europe may have ended, but the war at home to secure equal rights remained steadfast. In 1946, President Harry Truman established the President's Committee on Civil Rights. In 1947, this committee released their report entitled *To Secure These Rights*.⁴⁰ Initially tasked with investigating lynching and racial violence, the committee outlined a plan for governmental action to end racial discrimination and inequality. In 1947, Jackie Robinson broke the colour barrier in baseball. This began the integration of America's national pastime, and was a blow against the exclusion of blacks from American institutions. In preparation for the 1948 election, President Truman intensified his civil rights advocacy. On 2 February 1948, Truman addressed Congress and recommended enacting anti-lynching legislation, the establishment of a permanent Fair Employment Practices Commission, the prohibition of segregation on interstate transportation, the protection of black voting rights, the establishment of a permanent Commission on Civil Rights, and the creation of a Justice Department Civil Rights Division. He also hinted that he would issue executive orders to establish federal non-discrimination policies and eliminate segregation in the armed forces.⁴¹ Months later on 26 July 1948, Truman integrated the armed services with Executive Order 9981.⁴² Though the South renounced support of Truman after this, he won the presidential election of 1948. The congressional coalition of northern Republicans and southern Democrats hamstrung any significant legislation after the election, but the presidential race had a significant impact on future civil rights expectations, increasing expectations of President and party.⁴³

The above are some of the major and pertinent civil rights actions taken before and during the career of Joe Louis. It is necessary to understand these efforts to understand the state of civil rights at the time Joe Louis fought. Progress was slow, but the fight for civil rights accelerated towards the end of Louis' career. Important to note, aside from the general overview of what occurred and when, is the atmosphere during Louis' career. Though the civil rights movement had become more militant from the early days of Booker T. Washington's "go slow"

³⁹ Aldridge, 159-168.

⁴⁰ For the full text of President Truman's Executive Order 9908, which established the President's Committee on Civil Rights, as well as the full text of *To Secure These Rights*, see Commager, 35-41.

⁴¹ For the full text of Truman's address to Congress, see Commager, 44-48.

⁴² For the full text of Executive Order 9981, see Commager, 42-43.

⁴³ Aldridge, 169-196. See also Blaustein and Zangrando, 380-387, for the full text of President Truman's address to Congress and Executive Order 9981.

philosophy, it was still relatively benign. Most protesting was non-violent, and the process was very much a give-and-take. Riots and large-scale violence occurred, but it was usually spontaneous. At the federal level, the NAACP pursued a course that challenged segregation through the courts. The office of the President started to take up the fight as well, producing legislation to overturn centuries-old societal norms deemed unconstitutional. The political climate Joe Louis emerged into, then, can be said to be one of steady but cautious change.

JOE LOUIS

Joseph Louis Barrow was born 13 May 1914 in Lafayette, Alabama. He was the seventh child born into a family of sharecroppers. Louis' early life was inauspicious: he picked cotton on his family's farm and avoided going to school. His father was committed to a mental institution, where he was believed to have died. When the family was told of this death the widowed Lily Barrow, married another sharecropper, Pat Brooks. Brooks had eight children in the family, bringing the total number of children to fifteen. Despite the stories about his early life, Louis was not a fighter. By his own admission he was a quiet child who preferred to be alone.⁴⁴

Despite living in one of the most racially segregated states in America – in a time long before civil rights would become a concern – Joe Louis, by his own admission, seemed to live a life relatively insulated from racial animosity:

Funny thing, you know, people always asking me about Alabama: 'Those crackers must have given you a hard time.' 'Did the Ku Klux Klan bother your family?' To hell the honest absolute truth, there didn't seem to be anything bad between blacks and whites in Lafayette, Alabama, but you have to remember I was a little boy. There were other things that I did not take a hold to... Probably we never crossed the line to cause the angers and hurts and lynchings that took place all over the South. Another funny thing, I never heard about lynchings; nobody white ever called me a "nigger" until I got to Detroit.⁴⁵

This is worth noting because Joe Louis did not have a childhood that was notably defined by racial segregation. He was born into a family of sharecroppers, descended from slaves, but it never defined him. By his own admission, Louis' early life, as far as he was concerned, was free

⁴⁴ Joe Louis, Edna Rust, and Art Rust Jr., *Joe Louis: My Life* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), 1-10.

⁴⁵ Louis, Rust, Rust, 9.

of acrimony: “Life to me seemed fine, with plenty to eat, a warm place to stay, and loving relatives.”⁴⁶

When Louis was twelve, some of his stepfather’s relatives from Detroit, Michigan, came to visit. They spoke of cars, factories, jobs, and weekly paycheques. For his stepfather Pat Brooks, a man who wanted more than he had, this was enticing. As the family multiplied, their means did not. Brooks made the decision to try for a better life, and in 1926 Joe Louis and the rest of his family moved to the North.⁴⁷

The Louis family’s life in Detroit was relatively uneventful; their father worked as a street cleaner, most of the sons worked in the Ford plant. Joe got a job delivering ice. His mother wanted him to make something of himself, so she gave him money to take violin lessons. Louis was teased by everyone at school – he stood six feet tall, the size of a light heavyweight boxer, and carried around a tiny violin with him.⁴⁸ There was one person, however, who did not make fun of him: Thurston McKinney, winner of the 1932 Golden Gloves in Detroit in the 147-pound division. As Louis tells it, one day McKinney asked Louis to join him at the gym where he trained. Louis, who had only play-sparred with his friends before, became instantly enamored with the professional gym. He immediately took the fifty cents his mother had given him for violin lessons and rented a locker at the gym. McKinney later asked Louis to be his sparring partner. After catching a right to the jaw from McKinney, Louis became angry and threw a hard right at McKinney, almost knocking him out. From this instance, Joe Louis became transfixed with boxing: “That was the first time I knew what I really wanted to be.”⁴⁹

In 1934, Joe Louis won the Detroit Golden Gloves. On 12 June 1934, he knocked out Joe Bauer in his last amateur fight. That same year, Joe Louis moved to Chicago to live and train as a professional boxer.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ Louis, Rust, Rust, 10.

⁴⁷ Louis, Rust, Rust, 10-12. Interesting to note is the date of 1926: the Louis family’s migration took place on the heels of the “Great Migration.” Louis’ family, to wit, was not motivated by circulating copies of the *Chicago Defender* but rather the positive experiences that other family members had had in the north.

⁴⁸ The weight limit for the light heavyweight division is 175 pounds. The weight limit for the division below that, middleweight, was 160 pounds. In the 1930s there was no super middleweight division, so at the time Louis would have weighed somewhere between 160 and 175 pounds.

⁴⁹ Louis, Rust, Rust, 13-21.

⁵⁰ Louis, Rust, Rust, 31-33. Joe Louis’ move from Detroit to Chicago was fueled by proximity: Louis was initially represented by John Roxborough, a Detroit-area bookmaker. Roxborough knew Julian Black, a Chicago-based boxing promoter with a stable of young boxers. Black, in turn, had connections to Jack Blackburn, Louis’ future trainer. Louis moved to Chicago to live and train with Black and Roxborough. The triumvirate of Black,

Notable Fights

Joe Louis had a prolific boxing career. Not every fight, however, was profound. With that stated, a short summary of some of his most notable fights is necessary to better understand the analysis of source material presented later in this study.

On 4 July 1934, not even a month after his last amateur fight, Louis defeated Jack Kracken in his professional debut. The fight lasted less than two minutes, with Louis winning via knockout. The total purse for the fight was \$59. It was a simple start to a successful career, only notable because it was Louis' first fight.⁵¹

After the Kracken bout, Louis began ascending the heavyweight ladder. He fought various journeymen and title hopefuls, some ranked in the top ten.⁵² The first fighter that Louis fought of any note – at least in hindsight – was Primo Carnera. Carnera was a colossal Italian fighter, standing six and a half feet tall and weighing 260 pounds. He was also a tool of the mob, frequently engaging in fights that were rumoured to be fixed. His claim to fame was the erroneous attribution that he had killed a man in the ring, such was his power.⁵³ He fought Jack Sharkey for the heavyweight championship, and won in a match which was hotly speculated as being fixed. He lost the title shortly after acquiring it, and became a good test for Joe Louis: former title-holder, large fighter, known name. In June of 1935, disputes between Italy and Ethiopia had escalated to violent clashes and the threat of war. This international crisis provided the backdrop for the Louis-Carnera fight. Louis was claimed by the Ethiopian camp, Carnera by his native Italians. The media ran with the story, embellishing it as the media is wont to do. When they finally fought on 25 June 1935, the fight had become much more than a boxing match. The fight was stopped in the sixth round after Carnera refused to continue, having been badly battered by Louis. The black community rejoiced in the victory, celebrating in the streets

Roxborough, and Blackburn came to represent Louis throughout his entire career and are credited with creating and crafting the carefully chosen image that Louis portrayed.

⁵¹ Randy Roberts, *Joe Louis: Hard Times Man* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 52.

⁵² Roberts, *Joe Louis: Hard Times Man*, 53.

⁵³ The death of Ernie Schaaf was attributed to Primo Carnera. During his fight with Carnera, Schaaf was knocked out in the thirteenth round. He fell into a coma and was rushed to the hospital. When Schaaf died four days later, it was thought that Carnera's power had knocked the man into death. In actuality, Schaaf suffered a terrible knockdown at the end of his fight with Max Baer six months earlier. Though he was saved from an official knockout, he complained of headaches long after the fight, which led many to believe he suffered brain damage. If that were true, it would have taken only a few meager blows to the head to upset his existing condition and cause serious, life-altering trauma.

across America.⁵⁴

Joe Louis' next big fight was against Max Baer. Louis was building his stock as a black hero, and the black community turned out in numbers to see him fight. The Baer fight was one that America had been waiting for since Jack Dempsey and Gene Tunney had retired: it was the first million dollar gate since Tunney-Dempsey II. The appeal of this fight was the black vs. white narrative. Months before, Louis had been identified as the hero of Africa, and now that African hero was going to do justice for all the racial hurt endured by blacks in America. Louis stopped Max Baer in the fourth round. Again, blacks rejoiced throughout the nation. Louis gained a modicum of control in the heavyweight division with his victory, interesting considering he was not the champion. Joe Louis was the biggest draw in American boxing, and big-money fights now came his way.⁵⁵

The defeat that Louis faced at the hands of Max Schmeling stands as one of the most notable fights in Louis' career. This fight took on a significance extraneous to the ring. With this bout, Louis became the vehicle for all of America, black and white. His opponent was Max Schmeling, a German, and, by all accusations, a Nazi who was very comfortable in the presence of Adolf Hitler. In 1936, years after Hitler's rise to power in Germany and only a few short years before the start of the Second World War, this took on serious implications. Louis was thoroughly out-boxed en route to the first loss of his career. This fight had a dramatic effect on boxing throughout the world. Much like the Olympic Games, the boxing ring had transformed into another theatre of war, with Hitler showing off the supremacy of his beliefs in the strength of the German people.⁵⁶

Despite his loss to Schmeling, Louis subsequently strung together enough wins to earn himself a shot at James Braddock's heavyweight championship. By many admissions, Louis had "lost it" since his fight with Schmeling. As a black man with the odds stacked against him, this was a natural reaction. Cautious optimism in Louis' career was replaced with unrelenting pessimism after his failure. The fight with Braddock, however, allayed the peoples' concerns about Louis. In seven rounds, Louis pulverized Braddock to claim the heavyweight title. Like other Louis victories, the black community celebrated long and hard into the night, and with

⁵⁴ Roberts, *Joe Louis: Hard Times Man*, 66-83.

⁵⁵ Roberts, *Joe Louis: Hard Times Man*, 86-106.

⁵⁶ Roberts, *Joe Louis: Hard Times Man*, 113-120.

good reason: Joe Louis was now the second black heavyweight champion of the world.⁵⁷

Louis' first title defense was notable for two reasons. The first reason revolves around the politics of boxing. After Schmeling's victory over Louis, Schmeling tried to line up a title fight with Braddock. Braddock refused, opting to fight Louis instead. Schmeling – and the rest of Germany – viewed the Braddock-Louis fight as a fraud. Germany crowned Schmeling as the world's best boxer. Schmeling refused a rematch with Louis, and so Louis' promoters went after Tommy Farr, British and Empire heavyweight champion. Farr agreed to fight Louis instead of Schmeling, and Schmeling was forced to announce his intention to fight the winner of Louis-Farr. Tommy Farr managed to stay all fifteen rounds with Louis, the first time a Louis fight had ever gone to decision. This stick-to-itiveness on the part of Farr was labeled as lack of talent on the part of Louis, and his status of “has been” rose again in public opinion.⁵⁸

True to his declaration, Schmeling fought Louis in a rematch. This time, it was for the world heavyweight championship. After Louis' loss to Schmeling, many felt that all his wins lacked vindication: his defeat at the hands of Schmeling still hung over him. This fight gave Louis the chance to exercise his demons or prove the world right. Again, the fight took on extra significance; taking place in 1938 with World War Two about to break. The fight had little resemblance to its predecessor: Louis delivered one of the finest performances in his career and knocked out Max Schmeling two minutes and four seconds into the first round. The victory had several repercussions. Among them, Louis was now the undisputed heavyweight champion of the world, America scored a victory over fascism, and blacks and whites got together to back Joe Louis and celebrate his triumph. The odyssey of the two Louis-Schmeling fights was among the most defining moments of Louis' career.⁵⁹

After the rematch with Schmeling, Louis entered the period of his career affectionately referred to as the “Bum of the Month Club.” It was not that Louis was fighting bums; Louis fought the top contenders. Fight fans want to see fights, however, not beatings. Louis continued fighting regardless. Fiscal irresponsibility repeatedly led Louis into the ring, but it was a matter of diminishing returns: even the great Joe Louis could not salvage much money from his appearances. It became a vicious cycle: with every lop-sided victory over a “top contender,”

⁵⁷ Roberts, *Joe Louis: Hard Times Man*, 133-141.

⁵⁸ Roberts, *Joe Louis: Hard Times Man*, 145-146.

⁵⁹ Roberts, *Joe Louis: Hard Times Man*, 156-172.

more people became disinterested. With lower interest came a lower gate. With a lower gate came the need to fight more often, which meant fighting more “bums.”⁶⁰

Billy Conn seemed slated to join the club. He was a good light heavyweight, but was not seen as a serious threat to Louis’ title. When Conn and Louis fought in 1941, by the end of the twelfth round many believed Conn was ahead on points. An overzealous Conn, seeking the knockout, went out for the thirteenth round against Louis, who was aware that a knockout would be his only salvation. A plodding and patient Louis waited out Conn’s advances and dropped him with a series of punches that ended the fight with two seconds left in the round. This was one of Louis’ most dramatic fights, and it was significant because it would be a precursor to the rematch and the last quality heavyweight title fight before World War Two reached America.⁶¹

Rather than wait to be drafted, Louis enlisted in the United States Army. Rather than being sent to the front lines, Louis was used to stir up black support for the war effort, and to make money for the Navy Relief Society. Louis emerged from World War Two even more popular than he had entered it. He defended his title twice for military benefits, appeared in two military-related films, and fought nearly one hundred exhibitions. For his efforts, he received the Legion of Merit, the highest non-military medal award to military personnel. He had become a true American hero for his dedication to his country.⁶²

When Louis was released from the Army, a rematch with Billy Conn was waiting for him. The 1946 fight, however, was notable for its gate, not its action. The fight grossed nearly two million dollars, though this was considered a disappointment given the result of the first fight. The action in the ring was even more disappointing, as Conn avoided Louis until the eighth round, when Louis knocked him out. After the fight, Conn all but retired; Louis, on the other hand, continued fighting. This would be the beginning of the end for Louis.⁶³

Louis fought Jersey Joe Walcott twice before retiring and abdicating his throne. The first fight with Walcott went the distance, something that had not happened in over ten years, and only the second time in his career. The judges decided that Walcott needed to take the title from Louis, rather than have it awarded to him, and opted to give Louis the split decision. Louis had fought poorly but did not want to retire on such a disappointing note. Louis signed for a rematch

⁶⁰ Roberts, *Joe Louis: Hard Times Man*, 173-184.

⁶¹ Roberts, *Joe Louis: Hard Times Man*, 184-197.

⁶² Roberts, *Joe Louis: Hard Times Man*, 198-231.

⁶³ Roberts, *Joe Louis: Hard Times Man*, 235.

with Walcott, and this time knocked him out in the eleventh round. With that, he retired. He defended his title twenty-five times, seven more times than the previous eight champions combined. He held the championship for just over eleven years, a record that remains unmatched.⁶⁴

Joe Louis' retirement was similar to that of many other high-profile boxers and athletes: short-lived. Rather than a burning desire for one more fight, financial problems led Louis back into the ring. Owing a substantial amount of money to the government in back income taxes, Louis' only chance to pay them back was a big-ticket gate. Louis signed to fight the new heavyweight champion, Ezzard Charles. Louis lost an uneven decision to Charles, the second loss of his career. Worse, the fight made little money; far too little to make a sizeable dent in what he owed. Louis was forced to continue fighting, even if it was for a mere pittance. On 26 October 1951, Louis signed to fight a young Rocky Marciano. Age caught up with Louis in the eighth round and he was knocked out by Marciano. This signaled the final end of Louis' boxing career, and the end of an American icon.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ Roberts, *Joe Louis: Hard Times Man*, 236-239.

⁶⁵ Roberts, *Joe Louis: Hard Times Man*, 240-247. For the conclusion to Joe Louis' life and career, see Chapter 6: Conclusion and Epilogue, specifically pg. 117.

CHAPTER 3

The Life and Times of Muhammad Ali

It was not with Jack Johnson, Joe Louis, and Joe Frazier
that Ali stood, but with Garvey, DuBois, and Jomo Kenyatta.

-- Budd Schulberg, *Loser and Still Champion*¹

THE STATE OF COLOURED AFFAIRS: 1953 TO 1975

After 1952, the movement for civil rights in the United States gained momentum. With precedents set in decades past – Presidential and federal action, legal action – the envelope was pushed even further. The first, and one of the most renowned endeavors was the consolidation of numerous school segregation court cases into *Brown et. al. v. Board of Education of Tokepa, Kansas, et. al.*, known better as *Brown v. Board of Education*. This landmark case was first argued in December 1952 and concluded on 17 May 1954. On that day, the court announced its unanimous decision: school segregation was unconstitutional. This reversed the decades-old ruling of *Plessy vs. Ferguson*, which upheld state-sponsored segregation. The decision was

¹ Grant Farred, *What's My Name? Black Vernacular Intellectuals* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 27.

hailed by black leaders as the greatest they had seen in their lifetimes.² The *Chicago Defender* commented on the outcome of the case, stating its importance in the grand scheme in the pursuit of equality:

Neither the atom bomb nor the hydrogen bomb will ever be as meaningful to our democracy as the unanimous declaration of the Supreme Court that racial segregation violates the spirit and the letter of our Constitution.

This marks the beginning of the end of the dual society in American life and the system of legal segregation which supported it.

It is the prelude to the eventual complete emancipation of the Negro in America.³

A year later, after the *Brown v. Board of Education* victory in the Supreme Court, Rosa Parks was arrested on 1 December 1955 for refusing to give up her seat. This arrest gave the NAACP the chance to stage a bus boycott and challenge bus segregation in the Supreme Court, another judiciary move in the chase for equal rights.⁴

Despite the ruling of *Brown*, many schools – especially those in the South – resisted desegregation. One of the most well-known was Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas. When nine black students tried to enroll, they were met with pronounced opposition: a mob of whites surrounded the school, preventing any access; and Orval Faubus, the governor of Arkansas, instructed the Arkansas National Guard to prevent blacks from entering the school. This was the first civil rights confrontation to receive extensive television news coverage, and it showed segregationists at their worst. It helped to create sympathy for the civil rights campaign and caused many people to demand presidential intervention. Eventually, President Eisenhower ordered Faubus to remove the National Guard and allow the students entrance. Faubus acquiesced, but did so knowing full well the mob of whites would remain, this time without supervision. Eisenhower federalized the Arkansas National Guard following this and used them to escort the black students into the school. Though Eisenhower did not endorse desegregation,

² Daniel W. Aldridge III, *Becoming American: The African American Quest for Civil Rights 1861-1976* (Wheeling: Harlan Davidson, Inc., 2011), 203-207. For plenty of information on the *Brown* case, see Albert P. Blaustein and Robert L. Zangrando, eds, *Civil Rights and the Black American: A Documentary History* (New York: Simon & Schuster Inc., 1968), 406-448.

³ *Chicago Defender*, 29 May 1954.

⁴ Aldridge, 210-212

he demonstrated that he would obey the rulings of the federal courts.⁵

In the spring of 1961, CORE started a new civil disobedience campaign on the heels of other successful sit-ins and other civil disobedience movements. This campaign sent groups of riders on journeys from Washington D.C. to New Orleans in the hopes of forcing southern states to comply with the Supreme Court's 1960 decision ruling segregation in interstate travel to be unconstitutional. They referred to themselves as "freedom riders." In places they encountered violent resistance; a group of Klansmen awaited their arrival in Birmingham, Alabama, where they proceeded to viciously beat the riders and destroyed the bus by firebombing it. Like the Little Rock incident, the freedom ride was covered by the media, and images of the burning bus and beaten riders created more sympathy for the cause.⁶

The Birmingham demonstration of 1963 was another pivotal moment in the civil rights movement, and one of Martin Luther King Jr.'s first big initiatives. At that time, Birmingham, Alabama, was one of the most segregated cities in America. The campaign made use of non-violent resistance and aimed to fill the prisons with protesters, forcing the city government to negotiate. When the protesters – many of whom were high school-age – began their march on the county building, the police began arresting them. After the jail was filled, the police tried to disperse the crowd. They staked out a position, complete with fire hoses and attack dogs, and attempted to prevent the protesters from advancing. When the protestors drew near, they unleashed the hoses and dogs. As had been the case with the last few demonstrations, the media was on hand to capture the moment. The images of fire hoses and police dogs raining down on youths shocked the nation. The effect it had was widespread: that spring and summer, nearly 115 cities in eleven southern states saw protests similar to the one executed in Birmingham. During the campaign, King was jailed. While in jail, he wrote his "Letter from Birmingham Jail," which went on to become one of his most important works. The Birmingham campaign also reached the White House, spurring the Kennedy administration to introduce a comprehensive civil rights bill in Congress.⁷

That same year, after John F. Kennedy gave a pro-civil rights speech, the idea for a

⁵ Aldridge, 220-226. For more information on the southern resistance to desegregation, as well as Eisenhower's address on the Little Rock situation and his Executive Order 10730 appropriating the National Guard, see Blaustein and Zangrando, 451-458.

⁶ Aldridge, 234-243.

⁷ Aldridge, 252-263. For the full text of Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Letter from Birmingham Jail" see Henry Steele Commager, *The Struggle for Racial Equality: A Documentary Record* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), 145-162.

“March on Washington” – initially to promote employment – was planned, focusing its support on the Kennedy administration’s civil rights bill. Though Kennedy initially opposed the march fearing violence, he realized it could not be stopped and thus delivered an ultimatum: make it interracial, non-violent, patriotic, and pro-administration. The leaders of the March agreed. On 28 August 1963, the March on Washington took place. Initially expecting 100,000 marchers, a quarter of a million people arrived from all over the country to show their support, roughly 50,000 of them white. The event was seen as a huge success, and it was then that King gave his iconic “I Have A Dream” speech. Shortly after the march, John F. Kennedy was assassinated. When Lyndon B. Johnson, former Texas senator, took office, many feared that chances for civil rights would be weakened. Instead, Johnson surprised many by becoming an ardent supporter. Johnson used all his political leverage to support the legislation, and on 2 July 1963 the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was signed into law.⁸

In Selma, Alabama, the following year, another movement was started, this one taking aim at voting rights. Another series of non-violent protests in this segregated southern town produced similar results: days of marches turned out hours of media coverage. The crescendo of the movement occurred on 7 March 1964 when the protesters tried to make their way to Highway 80 to march to Montgomery. Before they reached the highway, they were met by a small army of state troopers and sheriff’s deputies wearing helmets and gas masks. What transpired would be termed “Bloody Sunday.” When the protesters refused to turn around, the troopers advanced and beat the group mercilessly with clubs, tear gas, bullwhips, and rubber tubes wrapped in barbed wire. Once again, this was caught on national television, and major news networks interrupted their scheduled broadcasts to intersperse footage of what was happening. The violent reaction by Southern authorities to the protest march provided support for another civil rights movement. On 17 March, the Johnson administration introduced the voting rights measures: on 6 August 1965, the Voting Rights Act was passed by Congress, prohibiting voter discrimination.⁹

Harmony, however, did not follow the Voting Rights Act. Mere days later, rioting broke out in the Watts section of South Central Los Angeles over unrelated incidents. By the times the

⁸ Aldridge, 263-271. For the full text of Kennedy’s 11 June 1963 civil rights address, see Commager, 163-168. For the full text of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, see Commager, 205-207.

⁹ Aldridge, 284-292. For the full text of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, see Commager, 214-216.

riots subsided, thirty-four people were dead. The cause of the riots was that poor, lower-class blacks believed that middle-class blacks, those leading the marches and protests, had abandoned them. This led to a deep-seated abandonment complex on the part of the lower-class blacks; they believed the mainstream black leaders had abandoned them, so they looked elsewhere for leadership. One of the institutions they turned to was the Nation of Islam, headed by Elijah Muhammad, a group that included Malcolm X. The Black Muslims – a way to refer to members of the Nation of Islam – like many other black nationalist groups, rebuffed the non-violent tactics of King and those like him. Inner turmoil within the Nation, however, led to Malcolm X's dismissal from the Nation; he, in turn, started his own splinter movement. Early in 1965, Malcolm X was assassinated. His death, perhaps more than his life, inspired those who opposed nonviolence and integration. With differences between those supporting non-violent action and those opposing it coming to a head, the slogan "Black Power" was created, and with it its own movement. This movement was widely accepted by lower class blacks and those tired of the mainstream nonviolence approach. Whites, on the other hand, became more fearful and hostile towards blacks. A shift in the media was noted, from sympathy for mainstream black leaders to condemnation of fiery black spokespersons. White America – its newspapers, its political leaders – also condemned the slogan and movement; Congress' refusal to pass the Civil Rights Bill of 1966 was evidence of this. Mainstream black leaders also opposed this new movement, referring to it as "the other side of the old coin of segregation."¹⁰ With black morale low, the summer of 1967 – referred to as the "long, hot summer" – experienced 159 race riots in many cities throughout the United States.¹¹

Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated on 4 April 1968; he represented one of the last vestiges of nonviolence and integration. Before his death, King had become increasingly outspoken against the Vietnam War. This, in turn, had soured his political allies against him. Despite this, a guilt-ridden Congress passed the Civil Rights Act of 1968 days later. Still, the death of King signaled the end of the civil rights movement. President Johnson's liberal "Great Society" had worn thin with ordinary whites and produced a conservative backlash in America that would dominate the remainder of the twentieth century. Richard Nixon, running for office in

¹⁰ Aldridge, 293-312.

¹¹ Blaustein and Zangrando, 617-618. In response to the riots of 1967 – as well as the preceding two years – President Johnson issued Executive Order 11365, which established the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders. For more information on the Order and the full text of the Commission's official report, see p. 617-655.

1968, won by positioning himself as the middle ground between liberal and conservative candidates. He defined his core constituency of voters as the “silent majority” of whites who resented attacks on middle-class America, while almost completely ignoring the black vote. Nixon’s presidency, combined with King’s death, changed the landscape for civil rights. What was once a popular, successful movement had been weakened by the loss of King, and was also weakened by the lack of federal support. Black nationalist parties – of which the Black Panthers were the most notable – became increasingly influential. The failure of moderate civil rights reformers was a victory for militant black nationalists. White fear, exacerbated when the FBI declared the Black Panthers public enemy number one, also helped the cause of the black nationalism movement. The inexperience of black radicals, combined with swift and vicious action from the government, made their attempts relatively short-lived. By 1974, most black radical groups had faded into obscurity.¹²

The black radical movement, however, finishes a period of civil rights history of utmost importance to this study. A movement that began strong and nonviolent eventually gave way to violence. The turbulence of this period is important to keep in mind as the career of Muhammad Ali is examined. Compared to Joe Louis’ time, civil rights had advanced significantly. What began as relatively benign and cautiously supported federal issue became active and widely endorsed by numerous Presidents. That happenstance, in turn, changed from active support to militant opposition. The political climate that Muhammad Ali emerged into was much more unstable than Louis’ era, and its tumultuous nature is important to note moving forward.

CASSIUS CLAY

The career of Muhammad Ali will be done inadequate justice if the fights are the only thing summarized. Ali had a distinct career outside the ring that greatly reflected his career inside it. Thus, both “inside” and “outside” are treated in order to render the fullest picture. Keeping with the restrictions of the study, this chapter will summarize important events from Ali’s birth to the end of 1975.

Muhammad Ali was born Cassius Marcellus Clay Jr. on 17 January 1942 in Louisville,

¹² Aldridge, 312-331. For a black radical’s take on the Black Power and the black nationalist movement, see Stokely Carmichael in Commager, 251-260. Carmichael was a leader of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and an “Honorary Prime Minister” of the Black Panthers.

Kentucky. Clay was born into a middle class family, the eldest of two children. His upbringing was relatively non-descript. His family could be considered “middle class” in Louisville in the 1940s and 1950s, and Clay “wasn’t a kid who ever missed a meal.” The one event that affected Clay most deeply was the murder of Emmitt Till in the summer of 1955. Till was mutilated by two white men in the South, a victim of racial prejudice. Till’s mother insisted on an open casket so the world could see what was done to her boy. The *Chicago Defender* ran front-page pictures of Till’s corpse. Cassius Clay’s father insisted that his two sons see the photographs. Clay felt the death on a personal level; Till was only a year older than Clay at the time. This incident helped Clay realize what a hostile world he was living in.¹³

On an October afternoon in 1954, when Clay was twelve years old, he had his brand new bicycle stolen outside the Columbia Auditorium. Below the auditorium there was a boxing gym run by a police officer; Clay went downstairs to report his bike stolen, telling the officer he would like to impose all kinds of harm on the one who stole it. The officer, amused, heard Clay out and questioned whether he could even fight. He advised him that it may be best to come around to his gym a few times before he made any challenges. Clay took the man up on his offer, and never looked back from boxing.¹⁴

When he was twelve, Clay began boxing and compiled an impressive amateur resume by the time he turned eighteen: one hundred wins, eight losses; two national Golden Gloves championships, and two national Amateur Athletic Union titles. The same year he turned eighteen – 1960 – Clay won the light heavyweight gold medal at the Rome Olympics. Shortly after returning home, Clay, securing a manager and financial backing, turned professional.¹⁵

Notable Fights And Events

Like Joe Louis, Clay fought a litany of inconsequential contests, but like Louis, too, a select few of his fights can be judged as historic. Unlike Louis, though, Clay’s career was influenced equally by things that occurred outside the ring. A brief synopsis of Clay’s career is necessary to contextualize later examination.

On 29 October 1960, Cassius Clay fought his first professional bout, a six-rounder

¹³ David Remnick, *King of the World: Muhammad Ali and the Rise of an American Hero* (New York: Random House, 1998), 81-89.

¹⁴ Remnick, 89-92.

¹⁵ Remnick, 95-111.

against Tunney Hunsaker. The fight went the distance; Clay won a decision.¹⁶ In the ensuing half decade, Clay became a top contender. On 25 February 1964, Clay was granted a heavyweight title shot against Sonny Liston. The fight was notable for its lead-up: Clay showed the world his flair for trash-talking and the psychological manipulation of his opponents. He threw numerous insults at Liston for weeks prior to the fight. In the end, Clay would defeat Liston when Liston refused to come out for the seventh round. Much controversy surrounded the fight, but Clay was crowned heavyweight champion.¹⁷

After Clay won the heavyweight crown, he formally announced his conversion to Islam, and joined Elijah Muhammad's Nation of Islam. Clay also developed a close friendship with one of Muhammad's disciples, Malcolm X. On 6 March 1964, days after defeating Liston, Cassius Clay was given the Muslim name of "Muhammad Ali," an honour bestowed by Elijah Muhammad to few members of the movement. There was, however, a growing divide between Malcolm X and Elijah Muhammad, and Ali was seen as a pawn in their power struggle. Ali's new name was seen as the winning stroke by Elijah Muhammad.¹⁸ This name change would make one of the most famous men in America one of the most visible Muslims in the America. At a time when blacks were campaigning for desegregation and equal rights – and when whites were increasingly suspicious of blacks – the Nation of Islam preached segregation and separation. Within the span of a few short weeks, the newly christened Muhammad Ali established himself as one of the most polarizing men in America.

Ali's next match following his title victory was originally scheduled to be a 16 November 1964 rematch with Liston. Ali, however, developed a hernia and the fight was postponed until 25 May 1965. Before the rematch occurred, on 21 February, Malcolm X was assassinated at a speaking engagement. In the rematch with Liston, Ali won via knockout in the first round. After a short exchange, Ali caught Liston with a "phantom punch" that sent Liston to the floor; the entire building – crowd, referee, everyone – went into a frenzy of confusion. The result, though, stood: Ali remained heavyweight champion.¹⁹

The next title defense Ali hosted was a significant fight, as well. This was one of Ali's first title defenses that mixed politics and boxing. Ali was scheduled to fight Floyd Patterson on

¹⁶ Remnick, 111.

¹⁷ Remnick, 145-204.

¹⁸ Remnick, 205-218.

¹⁹ Remnick, 232-262.

22 November 1965. This fight is important because, like Louis' earlier fights of Africa vs. Italy or America vs. Nazi Germany, the Ali-Patterson fight boiled down to Islam vs. Christianity. To Ali, Patterson represented the old-style black politics; the accommodationist, the integrationist, the symbol of interracial marriages and sit-ins. This fight occurred in the middle of the heated 1960s, having already witnessed the Freedom Riders and the sit-ins and the March on Washington and Martin Luther King Jr.'s dream. Ali's newly adopted religion found Patterson's credo unacceptable and pointless. Ali and the Nation preached Black Power. The animosity grew between the two fighters, and each was willing to fight for their religious camp. Patterson viewed himself as a sort of "Great Christian Hope" fighting to reclaim the heavyweight championship for Christian America. Ali began one of his favourite pre-fight antics by referring to Patterson as an "Uncle Tom" and "the white man's negro" because he believed Patterson was selling out his race through desegregation. In the lead up to the fight, Patterson refused to refer to Ali by his new name, opting instead to – purposefully – call him Cassius Clay, a dig at Ali's new religion. By the time the bell rang to start the first round, the fight had become personal. Ali wanted to destroy Patterson, and he did. Through twelve rounds Ali toyed with Patterson, beating him within an inch of a knockout, but never knocking him down. He wanted to keep Patterson in the fight to inflict more pain on him. The fight was finally stopped in the twelfth with Ali the victor.²⁰

After Ali's fight with Patterson, he entered the "ring" with another opponent: the United States Government. When Ali was eighteen, he had registered for the draft. Two years later, he was classified 1-A.²¹ Two years after that, he was ordered to an army induction centre to take a physical and written examination. He failed the test, and was reclassified as 1-Y.²² Later on,

²⁰ Remnick, 271-283.

²¹ Classification 1-A of the Selective Service System during the Vietnam War meant that the draftee was available for immediate, unrestricted military service.

²² Classification 1-Y of the Selective Service System during the Vietnam War meant that the draftee was available for military service, but was only qualified to be drafted in the event of war or national emergency. This was usually given to those found with conditions that were limiting but not disabling. In the case of Ali, it would have been his failed aptitude tests. It was reported he failed the fifty-minute-long aptitude test given to him, registering a score so low that the Army declared his IQ to be 78. An IQ score of 80-85 is typically seen in elementary school dropouts, or those who never made it to high school. Remnick touched on Ali's early education in *King of the World*, p. 94-95. Ali attended high school, but his marks were so poor he was forced to withdraw and come back. Despite his poor academic record, Ali won over the school principal with his dedication to boxing. As graduation approached, many teachers felt Ali did not deserve a diploma. The principal, however, gave his "Claim to Fame" speech where he informed them he would not be the principal that failed Cassius Clay. The teachers relented, and Ali was given a "certificate of attendance," the bare minimum. He finished 376th out of 391 students.

however, as the troop levels in Vietnam escalated, Ali was reclassified as 1-A, his earlier testing now being deemed good enough to fight. Shortly after learning of his reclassification, the media began to appear in force, questioning him. It was then that Ali uttered one of his most famous quips: “Man, I ain’t got no quarrel with them Vietcong.”²³ This declaration was a defining moment in the career of Ali. While his new Islamic faith did not endear him to Americans, it was only a religious affiliation. When Ali stated he had no quarrel with the Vietcong, he essentially positioned himself against America. The public started to view Ali as anti-American, a sentiment that can become vitriolic during wartime.

Over the course of the next year Ali continued to defend his title. The one fight of note was against Ernie Terrell on 6 February 1967. Like Patterson, Terrell refused to acknowledge Ali’s new name, insisting on referring to him as Cassius Clay. Throughout the fight Ali toyed with Terrell like he did Patterson, chanting “What’s my name? What’s my name?” as he hit him. Ali won by unanimous decision in lop-sided fight. Many of the journalists who were already critical of Ali’s anti-American sentiments used the Terrell fight to position Ali as a cruel, evil man.²⁴

On 28 April 1967, Ali appeared at the induction centre in Houston, Texas. As the men were lined up to “take the step forward” – a symbolic entry into the Army – Ali’s name was called. They called the name Cassius Clay and Ali remained still. They called him Ali and still he refused. When asked if he understood the penalty for draft refusal – five years imprisonment and a fine – he said he understood. He refused a final time and was asked to write a statement on his reasons for refusal. He wrote that he claimed to be exempt because he was a minister of Islam. Ali was eventually sentenced on 25 June 1967 to the maximum punishment for draft evasion: five years imprisonment and a ten-thousand-dollar fine.²⁵ One hour after Ali refused induction – before he was sentenced, convicted or even formally charged – the New York State Athletic Commission suspended his boxing license and withdrew recognition of him as champion. All other jurisdictions soon followed suit, and Ali was stripped of his title. Thus began a period of exile for Ali.²⁶

In 1970, three-and-a-half years after Ali had last fought, he was granted a license to fight

²³ Remnick, 285-287

²⁴ Remnick, 288-289.

²⁵ Remnick, 290-291.

²⁶ Thomas Hauser, *Muhammad Ali: His Life and Times* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991), 172.

again. This was largely a product of the country's changing feelings towards Vietnam; at first the American public supported the war, but as the issue became more controversial, the support of the public slowly waned. Ali, however, remained without his championship. His comeback fight was against Jerry Quarry, whom he defeated in three rounds. After another victory over another title contender, Ali found himself the top contender for a match against heavyweight champion Joe Frazier. This match with Joe Frazier was dubbed the "Fight of the Century." The fight, which took place 8 March 1971 earned each fighter a \$2.5 million dollar purse, then the largest-grossing bout in boxing history. The fight also played out similar to many of Ali's previous fights: personal attacks on Joe Frazier, referring to him as an Uncle Tom, and questioning his intelligence.²⁷ The event lived up to its billing: Ali and Frazier battled for fifteen rounds, with Frazier winning a unanimous decision and retaining the heavyweight championship. Following the Frazier bout, the Supreme Court reversed its initial decision. They did not declare Ali a conscientious objector, nor did they criticize the decision to convict him on draft evasion charges, but they ruled on a technicality which allowed Ali to be freed. This reversal allowed Ali to resume boxing full-time, and allowed him to travel the world, basking in his popularity.²⁸

The next notable fight of Ali's career came just over two years after his fight with Frazier. Having reeled off a string of victories following the Frazier defeat, Ali went into a fight with Ken Norton with considerable confidence. Norton would break Ali's jaw in the second round, but Ali would hang on for the rest of the fight, refusing it be stopped. He lost a decision to Norton for the second loss of his career. Six months later, with his jaw healed, Ali fought a rematch with Norton. Having trained properly, Ali was able to defeat Norton by decision.²⁹

²⁷ The personal attacks that Ali leveled on Frazier were something that Frazier never forgave Ali for. Frazier, who died recently in November 2011, went to his grave never having forgiven Ali for the way that he acted. Ali has run the gamut from apologizing to Frazier indirectly, to reiterating what he said initially. Frazier, however, never believed any of the apologies to be genuine and refused to accept them.

²⁸ Michael Ezra, *Muhammad Ali: The Making of an Icon* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2009), 148-151. Ali would serve no jail time in relation to the initial five-year sentence he received. His conviction was appealed, and he remained free during the appeal process, though unable to box. Because the his conviction was making its way through various appeal processes for years, Ali was not legally obligated to serve any jail time, and thus did not. The overruling of his initial conviction requires a slight explanation. Fearing that others may use Ali's "conscientious objector" claim as an easy way to avoid service, the government neglected to rule on Ali's status as a conscientious objector. They also did not criticize the decision to initially try and convict him of draft evasion. The courts allowed Ali to go free, but did so in a manner which still protected their interests. As a conscientious objector, one must submit to three basic tests to achieve conscientious objector status. Ali was refused status without reason, and thus it was ruled in court that, since no reason for his denial was given, it was impossible to determine which test he had failed. This meant that the conviction could not stand, and Ali's conviction was overturned on a "technicality."

²⁹ Hauser, 250-253.

Ali's next big fight would be a rematch against Joe Frazier, who was no longer the heavyweight champion. Five days before the fight, Frazier and Ali got into a scuffle on ABC's Wide World of Sports television show. Though the animosity remained steady between the two fighters, the return engagement was not as intense as the first. Both fighters inflicted very little damage upon each other. The outcome went to decision, with Ali winning a unanimous verdict.³⁰

Following the Frazier fight, Ali signed for a match against the heavyweight champion, George Foreman. The match would take place in Kinshasa, Zaire, on 30 October 1974, and was dubbed "The Rumble in the Jungle." The fight went down as one of the most famous sporting events in history. Ali, facing a younger, stronger Foreman, managed to win the fight and regain the heavyweight championship. The fight cemented Ali as a mainstream American hero, and indeed a hero throughout the world. He became one of few fighters to hold the heavyweight championship after having lost it. He was given all sorts accolades for his victory, further cementing his legacy.³¹

The famous third meeting between Ali and Frazier – Ali-Frazier III -- is last notable fight of Ali's career that occurred within the time constraints of this study. This fight took place on 1 October 1975 in Quezon City, six miles outside Manila in the Philippines. The fight was dubbed "The Thrilla in Manila." The result was vintage Ali and Frazier: the early rounds were taken by Ali, with Frazier capturing the middle rounds. In the fourteenth round Frazier's corner had seen enough and called for the referee to stop the fight, citing the heavy damage taken to Frazier's face.³² With Ali's final victory, an epic saga of fights was ended, and Ali was even more popular than he had been coming into the fight. The third fight with Frazier was the final fight of Ali's career that occurred before 1975.³³

³⁰ Hauser, 255-258.

³¹ Hauser, 259-280.

³² Hauser, 305-326.

³³ For the conclusion to Muhammad Ali's boxing career, and update to his life, see Chapter 6: Conclusion and Epilogue, specifically pg. 118.

CHAPTER 4

The Chicago Defender

If there was finally a black Joshua it was Robert Abbott, blowing the trumpet call of jobs through a rolled-up Defender; his troops were the Pullman porters and road shows, with labor agents as mercenaries.

Half a million blacks followed behind.

-- Florette Henri, *Black Migration*¹

The black press has a long history in America. The unofficial first age of the black press began with the nation's first black newspaper, *Freedom's Journal*, launched in New York in 1827. The development of the black press was simultaneous with two other significant developments in the United States: rising black protest and the increase in black literacy. In the North, the period between 1827 and the advent of the American Civil War in 1861 produced militant, black-authored journals that were critical of slavery and discrimination. They were highly intellectual and advocated full civil liberties for blacks. The most notable newspaper at the time was the *North Star*, edited by Frederick Douglass.²

The unofficial second age of the black press began following Emancipation; that is, following the Emancipation Proclamation issued by Abraham Lincoln on 1 January 1863. Black newspapers were free to be published and distributed in the South following Lincoln's executive order.³ The abolition of slavery fulfilled the primary goal of the black press in its initial stage of

¹ Florette Henri, *Black Migration: Movement North 1900-1920* (Garden City: Anchor Press, 1975), 79.

² Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*, 20th anniversary ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 912-913. Note: the American Civil War will herein be referred to as the Civil War, and will always refer to the American variation unless otherwise noted.

³ Myrdal, 913.

evolution. With that goal fulfilled, the black press set its sight on other areas where equality continued to be unrealized.

The black press grew exponentially following Emancipation, though the growth was slow. Many newspaper endeavours were small operations with limited circulations. Nevertheless, they remained publishing. The tone of the papers tended to align with the course promoted by author and important black figurehead Booker T. Washington: slow, non-confrontational, conciliatory action in the arena of race relations. The creation of the *Boston Guardian* in 1901 signaled the end of Washington's slow course. W.E.B. Du Bois, prominent black scholar and activist, decried Washington's recommendations of conciliation in a 1904 issue of the *Boston Guardian*. Du Bois' posture signaled both the early stages of the Niagara Movement – a civil rights movement seeking full equality for blacks, and opposing Washington's Atlanta Compromise – and the beginning of belligerent militancy in the black press.⁴

THE NEED FOR BLACK NEWS

The black press started out of simple necessity: white newspapers did not meet the needs of blacks. Countless scholars have researched the black press, discerning the reason for its creation and the effect it had on the black population. By the beginning of the twentieth century, the black press had transformed significantly from its beginning in 1827. Willis D. Weatherford and Charles S. Johnson detailed the inherent nature of black newspapers in their book *Race Relations: Adjustment of Whites and Negroes in the United States*:

Negro papers are first of all race papers. They are first and foremost interested in the advancement of the race. A large percentage of the editorials are concerned with justice to the race, with equal privileges, with facts of race progress, or with complaint against conditions as they are. Of course there occur from time to time well written editorials on topics of general interest, such as world peace, better political adjustment, or the progress of civilization; but it still remains true that most of the editorials are distinctly racial. The articles in these papers are usually propaganda – that is, they follow the line of the editorials. A great many are

⁴ Myrdal, 913-914. The Niagara Movement was named as such for two reasons: the “mighty current” of change that the group wanted to effect (like the mighty current of Niagara Falls) and Niagara Falls, Canada, where the first meeting of the group took place. The Atlanta Compromise was an agreement between Southern blacks and Southern whites that exchanged black submission to white political rule for the guarantee that blacks would receive basic education and due process under the law.

genuinely inflammatory.⁵

Weatherford and Johnson positioned the black newspaper as a direct voice for the Negro race, speaking to and for its citizens. Their evaluation, published in 1934, establishes the baseline for what the black press had become since its inception.

Black newspapers were created to help the race, but at the same time its purpose was to make its readers and its subjects feel accepted in their country. Frederick G. Detweiler, writing in 1922, originally touched on this desire for acceptance:

Through all the Negro press there flows an undercurrent of feeling that the race considers itself a part of America and yet has no voice in the American newspaper. Members of this group want to learn about each other, they want the stories of their successes, conflicts, and issues told, and they want to express themselves in public.⁶

Historian Frankie Hutton expounded on this desire for acceptance, painting black newspaper editors as “a relatively idealistic, optimistic group who, despite a myriad of problems and frustrations, continued to be unified in the newspaper columns on messages aimed at the vindication, uplift, and acceptance of blacks into mainstream America.”⁷ Though he was writing specifically on the state of the early black press in the period between the first black newspaper and the American Civil War, the analysis transcends the period to which it relates. Vindication, uplift, and acceptance were the common themes found in the black press from inception to the present day.

As the voice of an entire race, the black press wielded considerable influence. So much so that Edwin Mims, writing in 1926, referred to the black press as “the greatest single power in the Negro race.”⁸ Roi Ottley, former editor of the *New York Amsterdam News* and biographer of

⁵ Willis D. Weatherford and Charles S. Johnson, *Race Relations: Adjustment of Whites and Negroes in the United States* (Boston: D.C. Heath, 1934), 485.

⁶ Frederick G. Detweiler, *The Negro Press in the United States* (College Park: McGrath Publishing Company, 1968), 79.

⁷ Frankie Hutton, *The Early Black Press in America, 1827 to 1860* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1993), 3.

⁸ Edwin Mims, *The Advancing South: Stories of Progress and Reaction* (Port Washington: Kennikat Press, 1969), 268.

Robert S. Abbott, described the black press as the “greatest single force in the Negro world.”⁹ Gunnar Myrdal, Swedish economist, sociologist, Nobel Laureate, and keen analyst of American life, wrote about the importance of the black press in 1962:

The importance of the Negro press for the formation of Negro opinion, for the functioning of all other Negro institutions, for Negro leadership and concerted action generally, is enormous. The Negro press is an educational agency and a power agency. Together with the church and the school – and in the field of interracial and civic opinions, more than those two institutions – it determines the special direction of the process through which the Negroes are becoming acculturated. The Negro press causes, on the one hand, an intense realization on the part of the Negroes of American ideals. On the other hand, it makes them realize to how small a degree white Americans live up to them.¹⁰

It is abundantly clear that the black press, then, is one of the most important aspects of the black race. Numerous scholars have studied, dissected, and written about the role the press played – and still plays – in shaping American life, black or otherwise. The black press grew so much that by 1940, the United States Census Bureau reported the presence of 210 black newspapers, with 155 of them reporting circulation figures. The total circulation number is a matter of contention; the reported circulation was 1,276,600 readers, but estimates from other sources, Myrdal included, settle around 1,500,000 black readers per year.¹¹ The Census Bureau reported the black population in 1940 to be 12,865,518.¹² When compared to the original report on black newspaper circulation by the Census Bureau, we see nearly one in every ten blacks having access to a black newspaper. With the estimated numbers, it gets closer to one in every eight to nine blacks having access to a black newspaper. If the ambulatory nature of the black newspaper is taken into account – one copy was often shared among numerous people, and the papers were often read aloud due to illiteracy – it becomes easier to estimate that, in 1940, potentially every other black man or woman in the United States could have had access to a

⁹ Roi Ottley, *The Lonely Warrior: The Life and Times of Robert S. Abbott* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1955), 1.

¹⁰ Myrdal, 923.

¹¹ Myrdal, 1423.

¹² Campbell Gibson and Kay Jung, “Historical Census Statistics on Population Totals By Race, 1790 to 1990, and By Hispanic Origin, 1970 to 1990, For The United States, Regions, Divisions, and States,” *United States Census Bureau*, <http://www.census.gov/population/www/documentation/twps0056/twps0056.html>.

black newspaper's content.¹³

THE BIRTH OF THE *CHICAGO DEFENDER*

Robert Sengstacke Abbott was born in 1868 on St. Simons Island in Georgia. He was raised in Savannah, Georgia, by his mother, Flora Abbott, and his stepfather, John Sengstacke.¹⁴ At the age of nineteen, having graduated from Claflin University, Abbott enrolled in Virginia's Hampton Institute, following in the steps of Booker T. Washington, a man he greatly admired. After graduation, Abbott headed for Chicago. Facing racial obstacles in seeking employment, he enrolled in law school. When he was continually confronted with racial discrimination while searching for employment, Abbott decided to start a black newspaper in Chicago. His aim was to become self-sufficient and translate his law degree into improving the cause of racial justice in America.¹⁵

Despite Chicago's well-established black community and existing black newspapers, Abbott pressed forward. The first issue of Abbott's newspaper – titled the *Chicago Defender*, also known as the *Defender* – appeared on 5 May 1905. The initial product was hardly a sign of things to come: three hundred copies were printed, handbill-sized, and consisting only of four pages of local gossip and special interest pieces. The product was not as important as the concept: "The goal Abbott had for his paper was to fight for the black race, so he called it the *Defender*."¹⁶

The *Defender* toiled in obscurity for a few years until Abbott realized its calling. In 1909 he published a story about Chicago's "red light district." Fires in the city forced the relocation of the white-supported red light district temporarily into black neighbourhoods. But "temporary" gave way to "permanence" and black people found themselves forced to coexist with a new and unsavoury element of society. A report by the Chicago Vice Commission placed the blame for the existence of the red light district on the black population, prompting Abbott to respond with his first muckraking campaign – that is, a campaign designed to search for and expose corruption or scandal. With every story he published on his campaign against presence of the red light district, Abbott saw the popularity of his paper grow. This campaign taught Abbott many

¹³ The phenomenon of the ambulatory nature of the black newspaper will be examined later in this chapter.

¹⁴ Roland E. Wolseley, *The Black Press, U.S.A.*, 2nd ed. (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1990), 51

¹⁵ Alan D. DeSantis, "A Forgotten Leader: Robert S. Abbott and the Chicago Defender from 1910-1920," *Journalism History* 23, no. 2 (1997): 63.

¹⁶ Wolseley, 52.

lessons, most importantly that “Negroes respond to a rousing fight, especially if underscored by a racially high-minded purpose.”¹⁷

As Ottley acknowledged in his work on Abbott’s life, Myrdal pronounced Abbott as “the greatest single force in Negro journalism, and indeed the founder of the modern Negro press.”¹⁸ As Abbott continued his muckraking crusade, popularity followed. Abbott found that many people were willing to devote their efforts to his cause. Of all the additions Abbott made to his staff, the hiring of J. Hockley Smiley in 1910 as the managerial editor was the most significant. Smiley and Abbott transformed the *Chicago Defender* from a small-town gossip paper to a legitimate “front-line” newspaper. They examined the layout of white newspapers and applied much of what they saw. They adopted banner headlines, varied the font sizes, printed political cartoons, incorporated more photography, and employed one of the calling cards of the *Defender*: printing highlights in red ink. They also developed the *Defender*’s slogan, “The World’s Greatest Weekly.” They organized the paper into sections, whereas previously it had been a piecemeal effort. The paper became a “clearly focused organ for racial advancement.” They combined all of these changes with a new policy of sensationalism. Common headlines like “100 Negroes Murdered Weekly in United States by White Americans” and “White Gentleman Rapes Colored Girl” became commonplace.¹⁹ What was initially viewed as lowbrow tactics by other newspapers quickly became adopted after realizing the success of the *Defender*. Abbott and Smiley brought to the *Defender* a structure and technique then unknown to black newspapers, and this helped set their paper apart from all those that rose from similar modest roots.

One of the most interesting developments of the early *Defender* – and one that set it apart from other publications, both black and white – was the way in which it referred to blacks. Abbott disliked the terms “Negro” and “black” and the newly-coined “Afro-American.” As reported by Ottley, Managerial Editor Smiley developed a new method of referring to members of their race:

[He] established a style sheet that excluded “Negro,” Afro-American” and “Black” altogether, and instead used “Race” – thus “Negro business” became “Race business,” Negro men” were “Race men,” “Negro achievement” was dubbed “Race achievement,” and the group was labeled “The Race.” Sometimes

¹⁷ Ottley, 97-99. Quote found on p. 99.

¹⁸ Ottley, 2.

¹⁹ Ottley, 105-110. See also DeSantis, 64-65 for a more succinct overview of the early history of the *Defender*.

Smiley used “Colored,” which, of all the terms, had the nice sound of respectability and refinement. Today the adjective “colored” and the generic designations “Negroes” and “Negro,” used currently by the *Defender*, are considered acceptable terms, but the use of “negress” and “negro” in lower case – and of course “nigger” – is unforgivable.²⁰

With Smiley in tow, Abbott and the *Defender* were ready to make an impact on the black community. In his essay on Abbott and the *Defender*, Alan D. DeSantis believed that “the period between 1910 and 1920 is viewed as the most important and influential epoch of [Abbott’s] auspicious career.”²¹ The success of the *Defender*, however, was tempered in 1915 by the death of Abbott’s hero, Booker T. Washington. On 14 November 1915, the *Defender* produced its first extra: “Booker T. Washington DEAD!” accompanied by the date, time, and location of his passing.²² On 20 November, the *Defender* ran a large portrait of Washington in full academic regalia – likely that of the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, of which he was president. The banner headline read “WORLD WEEPS FOR WASHINGTON.”²³ Washington’s death had a unique effect on the black newspaper: it “marked the passing of a period of patience, moderation and conciliation among Negroes.”²⁴ With Washington’s death, the unofficial second age of the black press came to a close. Since Emancipation, black newspapers had sought to enlighten and empower. With the last vestige of conciliation in the black community laid to rest, black reaction would no longer be tempered. W.E.B. Du Bois became the chief voice against black injustice. With Washington’s desire for inaction no longer restricting him, Du Bois promoted a course of action. Many in the nation followed suit.

By 1915, the *Defender*’s circulation reportedly reached 230,000.²⁵ This was a number that had never been realized by black newspapers. The *Defender* was the first black newspaper to gain a six-figure circulation.²⁶ Along with the major changes to the *Defender*, Smiley and Abbott

²⁰ Ottley, 110.

²¹ DeSantis, 63.

²² Ottley 121-122.

²³ *Chicago Defender*, 20 November 1915.

²⁴ Ottley, 121.

²⁵ Wolseley, 54. This number – along with most reported numbers in secondary sources – must be taken with a grain of salt. The number of 230,000 is quoted as having come from Abbott’s own investigations, giving plenty of reason for it to be inflated. What is more, Abbott’s biographer, Roi Ottley, wrote in *The Lonely Warrior* that the Audit Bureau of Circulations only began to guarantee the circulation claims of newspapers in 1914, and in 1914 had not yet included analysis of black newspapers.

²⁶ Armistead S. Pride and Clint C. Wilson II, *A History of the Black Press* (Washington: Howard University Press, 1997), 217.

also worked on increasing the newspaper's national circulation. Abbott knew that becoming the greatest black newspaper meant being read by blacks all over America. With 85 percent of the black population in 1917 residing in the American South, remaining local to Chicago readers only would not give the *Defender* the exposure that Abbott desired.²⁷ To accomplish this aim for widespread exposure, Abbott built up one of the most impressive shipping networks of his time. Making use of the American railroads that penetrated to all corners of the country, Abbott and Smiley recruited Pullman porters, dining car waiters, stage people in road shows, and traveling entertainers to spread the *Defender* throughout the South. Chicago was a principal railroad terminal, with hundreds of porters and waiters coming and going daily. Realizing they were the only blacks to travel on regular schedules, Smiley offered them money to sell the paper. Bundles were delivered to specific stops, where they were then distributed. Free papers were circulated in cities visited for the first time. They "enlisted this footloose army to hurdle the thorny problems of distribution." By 1919 the *Defender* had spread to even the most remote corners of the South.²⁸ The *Defender's* 1919 shipping manifest lists 1,542 towns and cities across the South, with copies being sold in Arkansas, Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Florida.²⁹ This gave the *Defender* massive exposure, and opened the paper up to an entirely new group of people. Robert S. Abbott, the black Joshua, was about to find his people.

Joshua was a key figure in the biblical Exodus who, along with Moses, led his people out of Egypt and out of a life of slavery. For Abbott, his Egypt was the American South. Abbott frequently decried the negative conditions in the South, underscoring more positive conditions for blacks in the North. This reporting slowly turned to persuasion and, beginning at some point between 1916 and 1917, Abbott commenced the journalistic campaign that would define his career, and define the *Chicago Defender*.³⁰

This campaign turned into what historians have labeled the "Great Migration," in which Abbott and the *Defender* played a key role. Abbott consistently railed against the conditions in the South, decrying the uneven treatment and urged his brethren to seek equality:

Every black man for the sake of his wife and daughters especially should leave even at a financial sacrifice every spot in the south where his worth is not

²⁷ DeSantis, 65.

²⁸ Ottley, 136-137. Quote found on p. 136.

²⁹ Grossman, 79.

³⁰ DeSantis, 66.

appreciated enough to give him the standing of a man and a citizen in the community. We know full well that this would almost mean a depopulation of that section and if it were possible we would glory in its accomplishment.³¹

From 1917 to the summer of 1919, it is estimated that 250,000 blacks left the South to settle in the “Land of Hope” in the North.³² During this period, Chicago’s population more than doubled.³³ While the Great Migration was not executed and supported strictly by the black press, it did play an important role. On 11 August 1917, the *Dallas Express* commented on the vigor of the press during the Great Migration:

Every Negro newspaper and publication in this broad land, including pamphlets and books, and the intelligent Negro pastor with backbone and courage are constantly protesting against the injustice done the Negro. And possibly these agents have been the greatest incentives to help create and crystallize this unrest and migration.³⁴

Of all the black newspapers at the time, the *Defender* boasted the largest circulation. Though it was not the only black newspaper calling for Southern blacks to take flight, it did play one of the most important roles. So much so that “it was Abbott who fleshed out the vision for escape, who gave it a definite and dramatic form—even a birthday: the Great Northern Drive of May 15, 1917.”³⁵ For a paper that boasted two-thirds of its readership outside the city limits of Chicago, its influence was considerable.³⁶ In 1919, the *Chicago Daily News* ran a story that claimed “the *Defender* more than any other one agency was the big cause of the ‘northern fever’ and the big exodus from the south.”³⁷ A Georgia newspaper referred to the *Defender* as “the greatest disturbing element that has yet entered Georgia.” The United States Department of Labor said that in some sections of the South, the *Defender* was probably more effective in carrying off

³¹ *Chicago Defender*, 7 October 1916.

³² DeSantis, 66.

³³ DeSantis, 71. In endnote 27 (DeSantis, 65), DeSantis provides more information on the population numbers during the period of migration. Specifically, he mentions that Chicago’s black population grew from 44,103 to 109,458 from 1917 to 1919, with 10% of the entire black population of the South migrating north.

³⁴ Detweiler, 73.

³⁵ Henri, 63.

³⁶ Ottley, 139.

³⁷ Ottley, 159.

labor than all the agents put together.³⁸ The power of the *Defender* rested in its ability to speak from a common ground to common people. Blacks were imploring other blacks to throw off their chains and begin a better life in the North.

By the summer of 1919, the *Defender* had reached the peak of its popularity. As with all crescendos, though, a diminuendo is an inevitability.³⁹ The Great Migration ended with the “Red Summer” of 1919, so named because of all the bloodshed seen in Chicago as the city fell victim to more than two dozen race riots. The causes of the riots, among other things, were expanding ghettos and tensions over housing and employment. On 27 July 1929, a clash between whites and blacks at a Lake Michigan beach resulted in the drowning of a black boy who crossed the invisible colour barrier. The white responding officer refused to arrest the perpetrating whites – instead arresting a black on a minor charge. The blacks attacked the police officer. Within two hours the riot was at full strength and spreading throughout the city. By 2 August, the riot yielded to law forces and by 8 August was settled enough that the state militia withdrew. The final toll was devastating: thirty-eight deaths, 537 injured, about 1,000 rendered homeless and destitute.⁴⁰ The *Defender* ran a daily box score to keep track of the casualties during the riot.⁴¹ Chicago saw a total of twenty-two race riots erupt over that summer and they became the *coup de grâce* of the Great Migration. Abbott’s migration campaign began to lose intensity as he realized the North was not as problem-free as he had believed.⁴²

Unfortunately for Abbott, many things beyond his control began to factor into his life and work. The Great Migration that he had worked so hard to spearhead culminated in a watershed moment for his newspaper: according to a promotional pamphlet issued by the *Defender* in 1920, circulation peaked at 283,571.⁴³ Walter White, a civil rights activist who went on to lead the NAACP from 1931 to 1955, estimated the southern circulation of the *Defender* at 75,000. To White, this translated into “approximately 300,000 readers who see the *Chicago Defender* each

³⁸ Henri, 63. The agents referred to at the end of this citation are “labor agents.” Labor agents travelled around the country as “employment recruiters.” It would be their responsibility to find people to fill positions of need on behalf of whatever company would pay them for their efforts.

³⁹ A diminuendo is a gradual decrease in force or loudness; or the opposite of a crescendo, a term popular in music.

⁴⁰ Commission on Race Relations, “The Negro in Chicago: A Race Riot (1922),” in *Blacks in White America Since 1865: Issues and Interpretations*, compiled by Robert C. Twombly (New York: David McKay Company, Inc., 1971), 202-203.

⁴¹ Aurora Wallace, *Newspapers and the Making of Modern America: A History* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2005), 57.

⁴² DeSantis, 69.

⁴³ Ottley, 138.

week.”⁴⁴ This celebratory news was delivered on the heels of graver tidings, however. In 1918 combat in the First World War ended with the armistice of 11 November 1918; the war officially ended with the signing of the Treaty of Versailles on 28 June 1919. Black people, discriminated against nationwide were also discriminated against in the armed forces, with many being refused entry. Thus, it was largely the white soldiers that fought in Europe for the United States. And it was largely the white soldiers that returned from France after the armistice and peace treaty to find their jobs in jeopardy:

When the war ended and the soldiers returned to find their jobs taken over by blacks, the inevitable racial clashes occurred. Whites, anxious to reaffirm the old caste lines, acted in ways intended to negate the economic and psychological gains made by blacks during the war, but the newly settled black laborers and the many black men returning from military service in Europe were in no mood to be pushed around.”⁴⁵

Life for returning soldiers was not the same as what they left behind in 1917, especially in Chicago. The average Chicagoan returned to post-war Chicago to find a black population that had more than doubled. This new population of blacks had not been sitting idly by: without malicious intent, they appropriated many of the jobs and lifestyles that the departing white soldiers left behind.⁴⁶ In a largely intolerant period in time, this presented many issues, from the standard discrimination to the ever-popular “they took our jobs” banner being flown. As whites tried to reclaim their lives, racial tension was high as violence and rioting ensued. This attempt by whites to reclaim their lives occurred during – and directly contributed to – the “Red Summer” mentioned earlier.

The end of the war also signaled the end of one of the most high-posture story lines for

⁴⁴ James R. Grossman, *Land of Hope: Chicago, Black Southerners, and the Great Migration* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), 79-80. This is an excellent example of circulation numbers being wildly varied. Estimates for the *Defender* in 1920 vary anywhere from 120,000 to 230,000, significantly below the self-reported 283,571 by Abbott himself. In most cases, the reported circulation of the *Defender* (strictly through secondary sources) always tempers the *Defender's* reports and declares a lower circulation. I believe that White assumed that the southern circulation would be added on to the regular circulation, with 230,000 and 75,000 coming out to an excess of 300,000. Having little experience in the field of calculating newspaper circulation, I would assume this method to be incorrect, with the reported circulation representing the entire country, not just a region, unless explicitly stated. Regardless, this high-water mark reported by an important official in the NAACP bears consideration. If the NAACP found the circulation of the *Chicago Defender* to be important, then so does this study.

⁴⁵ Thomas R. Frazier, ed., *Afro-American History: Primary Sources*, 2nd ed. (Belmont: Wadsworth, 1988), 231.

⁴⁶ DeSantis, 69.

the *Defender*. No longer could Abbott rail against the inequality in the armed forces; he could, but it was hardly the kind of issue that would light a fire in peacetime. The lack of war and riot news meant there was little sensational material to exploit. There was also the ever-present threat of competition from other black newspapers, namely the *Chicago Whip* which sold for a nickel to the *Defender's* dime.⁴⁷ The end of the war, combined with the end of the Great Migration and renewed hostilities against blacks, signaled a period of trouble for the *Defender*, as well as blacks in general in Chicago and throughout the North.

Though most secondary sources disagree on the circulation numbers of the *Defender*, the one fact that they agree on is that the 1920s saw a decrease in circulation. The “peacetime” conflicts between blacks and recently returned whites and the lack of big ticket stories saw paper sales decline through the decade. The *Defender* hit dire straits in the 1930s with the advent of the Great Depression. To be fair, there was little that was not affected by the Great Depression, hence the designation of “great.” Regardless, the powerful *Defender* had its work cut out for it. To add to this conundrum, it would also have to deal with new competition.

COMPETITION FOR INFLUENCE

The *Pittsburgh Courier* was founded in 1910. It followed the lead of the *Defender*, building a national circulation supported by a complex distribution network.⁴⁸ By the 1920s, Pennsylvania had the highest black population of any northern state, affording the *Courier* an ample audience.⁴⁹ In 1929, the *Courier* advertised itself as “America’s Best Weekly” – perhaps taking the lead of the World’s Greatest Weekly, the *Chicago Defender*.⁵⁰ By the 1930s it became the most widely read black newspaper and remained the most read for the decades that followed.⁵¹ In 1947, it boasted a circulation of 330,000, doing \$2 million worth of business a year.⁵²

⁴⁷ Wolseley, 54.

⁴⁸ Brian Carroll, “Early Twentieth-Century Heroes: Coverage of Negro League Baseball in the Pittsburgh Courier and the Chicago Defender,” *Journalism History* 32, no. 1 (2006): 35.

⁴⁹ Andrew Bunie, *Robert L. Vann of the Pittsburgh Courier: Politics and Black Journalism* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1974), 100.

⁵⁰ Pride and Wilson, 138.

⁵¹ Carroll, 35.

⁵² Pride and Wilson, 139. Like the circulation numbers of the *Defender*, the numbers for the *Courier* leave much to be desired by way of accuracy. Hayward Farrar’s *The Baltimore Afro-American* reported the 1947 circulation of the *Courier* at 277,990, well below 330,000. Hayward Farrar, *The Baltimore Afro-American, 1892-1950* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1998), 16. Important to note is that the circulation of the *Defender* was diminishing, while the

Like the *Defender* of years before, the *Courier* took up numerous causes it felt important to its people. The radio show “Amos ‘n’ Andy” polarized the black community. The *Defender* supported the show while the *Courier* virulently opposed it. The *Courier* went so far as to recruit the NAACP to present a petition – signed by 740,000 people, to the Federal Radio Commission in opposition of the show.⁵³

The Amos ‘n’ Andy controversy was nothing compared to the *Courier*’s two biggest campaigns: its Double-V campaign and its campaign against the baseball color line. The Double-V program – Victory at Home and Abroad – was conceived by a *Courier* reporter in 1941. It sought equality for all fighting blacks, believing that they should receive full citizenship for serving their country in the Second World War.⁵⁴

The *Courier*’s campaign against the color line in baseball is well-documented.⁵⁵ Commenced in 1933, it was an all-out blitz against professional baseball’s color line. When the *Courier* was asked to produce qualified players, it paid the expenses of Jackie Robinson, Sam Jethroe, and Johnny Wright to participate in try-outs. In 1946, Jackie Robinson was signed by Branch Rickey’s Brooklyn Dodgers, and history was made.⁵⁶

The *Courier*, like the *Defender*, produced results in the eyes of the people. It called for change, and it saw change, much like the *Defender*. The circulation numbers reflect the effect it had on the community. In their history of the black press, Pride and Wilson wrote:

From time to time, as necessity dictated, a substitution was made in the column-writing lineup of both the *Defender* and the *Courier*. No other newspaper could match the prestigious array of national and regional figures that these two newspapers offered from week to week, discoursing on topics of deep concern to the Negro.⁵⁷

The *Pittsburgh Courier* certainly presented itself as a worthy adversary to the *Defender*.

circulation of the *Courier* was increasing. The two were likely tied somewhere in the middle of the 1930s, with the *Courier* then taking the mantle. If one thing is clear, it is that the *Courier* was king in the post-Depression era.

⁵³ William Barlow, *Voice Over: The Making of Black Radio* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999), 41-43.

⁵⁴ Pride and Wilson, 139.

⁵⁵ See David K. Wiggins’ *Wendell Smith, the Pittsburgh Courier-Journal and the Campaign to Include Blacks in Organized Baseball, 1933-1945* for an in-depth treatment of the relationship between the *Courier* and the end of the colour line in baseball.

⁵⁶ Pride and Wilson, 139.

⁵⁷ Pride and Wilson, 152.

DEFENDING THE *DEFENDER*

Despite its accomplishments and initial popularity during the period which this study examines, the *Pittsburgh Courier* is not the newspaper that is investigated. Instead, the *Chicago Defender* is the focus of this study, and with good reason.

In an 11 September 1937 *Defender* editorial, Abbott wrote on the effects that the press can have on the general public:

The daily press is a powerful weapon for good or for evil. It speaks to millions throughout the day; it moulds their opinions; it can help hinder or destroy. And it can array nation against nation, race against race with its vicious appeals through curtly phrased and morbid headlines. This is an art known only to experts of the editorial rooms.

This cognizance is one of the reasons why the *Defender* was chosen as the vessel for this study, and why it was chosen over the *Courier*. It set the standard for black newspapers at a time when the standard barely existed, and it continued to produce on that standard for years. What truly sets the *Defender* apart is its impact and influence, lasting popularity, unique platform, widespread circulation, and sports pedigree.

Impact And Influence

As previously mentioned, the *Defender* pioneered a nationwide distribution network. Though this network was given much of the credit for the success and the scope of the Great Migration by other writers, James Grossman, in his book on the Great Migration titled *Land of Hope*, questions the enormity of credit given Abbott and the *Defender*:

Because significant migration had occurred before the *Defender* either publicized or supported the exodus, Abbott can hardly be accorded such exalted status, even if the propitious economic conditions created by World War I are taken for granted.⁵⁸

Nevertheless, Grossman does not dismiss the influence of Abbott and the *Defender*: “he and his newspaper played a central role in the communications network that shaped and facilitated the

⁵⁸ Grossman, 88.

Great Migration as a social movement.”⁵⁹ This network was one of the primary instances of the *Defender’s* influence. At the height of its circulation, the *Defender’s* distribution network peaked with 2,359 agent-correspondents throughout the country. A network like this does not collapse overnight, and many people may well have remained loyal to the *Defender* for years.

On top of the massive network it constructed, the *Defender* cemented its impact with many accomplishments along the way. The first black newspaper with a six-figure circulation, it also became one of the few leading newspapers that also published a national edition. In 1956 the *Defender* converted from a weekly to a daily, and in doing so became the largest black-owned daily in the world.⁶⁰ The Associated Negro Press (ANP), a black news agency, was formed at the *Chicago Defender* during World War I by Claude Barnett, a *Defender* employee.⁶¹ During the Second World War the ANP, along with other regional syndicates, fell under the banner of the Negro Newspaper Publishers’ Association (NNPA), also formed at the offices of the *Chicago Defender*, which aimed to present a unified front to the government on war issues. The *Defender* installed Harry McAlpin, who was the first black correspondent inside the White House.⁶²

In its prime during the Great Migration, the *Defender* “distinguished itself from its competitors in its radicalism, popularity, and influence.” After having helped draw a quarter of a million blacks out of the South, the white community – specifically white southerners who relied on cheap black labour – began to react negatively to the newspaper. Several cities tried to prevent the distribution of the paper. In Alabama, whites attacked and killed two *Defender* distributors. An Arkansas judge issued an injunction restraining the circulation of the paper in Jefferson County and Pine Bluff, and the governor of Georgia requested the postmaster general exclude the paper from the mail. Abbott himself also drew the interest of the white authorities, falling under a net of surveillance that included the United States Government, the military, the postal service, and the Justice Department’s Federal Bureau of Investigation.⁶³ The *Defender* set itself apart from other newspapers on impact and influence alone. Its role in the Great Migration, and the numerous firsts it recorded provided an impressive résumé. The polarizing nature of the

⁵⁹ Grossman, 88.

⁶⁰ Wallace, 72.

⁶¹ Pride and Wilson, 164.

⁶² Wallace, 58-59.

⁶³ DeSantis, 69.

newspaper – vilified by whites, celebrated by blacks – is proof of the impact and influence it had throughout its history.

Lasting Popularity

The health of the *Defender* was not the only thing failing in the 1930s: the death of Abbott's mother, the depression, and the attention needed for a new magazine he started – *Abbott's Monthly* – drained him of his health. In 1939, Abbott willed two-thirds of his estate to his nephew, John H. Sengstacke, and tasked him with the responsibility of carrying on the paper. Abbott died shortly thereafter in 1940.⁶⁴ Despite this, the *Defender* endured, remaining a popular source of information for the black community. Sengstacke was no slouch, and was prepared to inherit the *Defender*, having been responsible for much of the paper's leadership during World War Two. Almost immediately, Sengstacke helped the *Defender* secure a stable financial foundation, and gave it a different political stance than in its earlier days. The at times vitriolic nature of the early *Defender* was replaced with a more patient tone, though never to point of compromising its integrity.⁶⁵ Sengstacke also began studying, analyzing, and preparing the *Defender* for an important shift: in 1956, it changed from a weekly to a daily, becoming the largest black-owned daily newspaper in the world. The civil rights movement resulted in the white press poaching most of the black talent from the best newspapers. Sengstacke countered this with consolidation: he purchased other black papers, including the *Michigan Chronicle* and the *Memphis Tri-State Defender*.⁶⁶

The final victory for Sengstacke and the *Defender* came in 1965, when Sengstacke purchased the faltering *Pittsburgh Courier*, putting an end to one of the most competitive rivalries in the history of the black press.⁶⁷ The lasting popularity seen by the *Defender*, as well as its swift victory over its largest competitor, is another reason why the *Defender* was chosen as the focal point for this study.

Unique Platform

The platform of the *Defender* is yet another reason why this paper was examined. Unique

⁶⁴ Wolseley, 55.

⁶⁵ Wolseley, 55.

⁶⁶ Wallace, 72.

⁶⁷ Wallace, 72.

to the *Defender*, its platform not only appeared in nearly every issue since its inception, but continuously evolved throughout the years. Every newspaper had a platform, and the *Defender* took the steps to publish it in nearly every issue in its editorial section.

The “Defender’s Platform For America” started small in February 1922 with two points: a free ballot, south as well as north; and abolition of Jim Crow streetcars.⁶⁸ Months later in April, those two points changed to the opening up of all trades and trade unions to blacks as well as whites, and the appointment of a member of the Race to the President’s cabinet.⁶⁹ That platform remained for the next five years until it was expanded with four new points: men of Race in police departments over entire United States; engineers and firemen of Race on American railroads, steamships and government controlled industries; government schools open to all American citizens in preference to foreigners; and motormen and conductors of Race on street railways throughout the United States.⁷⁰ This list goaded readers with an eye-catching statement printed above it: “AMERICAN RACE PREJUDICE MUST BE DESTROYED – Robert S. Abbott.”⁷¹ A few months later, a seventh point was added: motormen and conductors of Race on surface, elevated and motorbus lines in the city of Chicago.⁷² Weeks after that, the *Defender* changed yet again to a more robust nine-point platform, which included federal legislation to abolish lynching, and full enfranchisement of all American citizens in its aims.⁷³

Small changes occurred again in 1933, with a tenth point added, one that was developed to head the list: American race prejudice must be destroyed! – Robert S. Abbott. The text of the original points changed slightly, to become more concise, but the content remained the same.⁷⁴

In 1952, the title was shortened to “Defender Platform” and from that point on “conductors on all railroads throughout the United States” was removed.⁷⁵ The platform remained unchanged for more than twenty years following that. In 1975, the title was changed to “Our Platform” and the list was almost completely reworked; it stood as such:

⁶⁸ *Chicago Defender*, 25 February 1922.

⁶⁹ *Chicago Defender*, 1 April 1922.

⁷⁰ *Chicago Defender*, 30 April 1927.

⁷¹ *Chicago Defender*, 25 August 1928.

⁷² *Chicago Defender*, 26 January 1929.

⁷³ *Chicago Defender*, 16 February 1929.

⁷⁴ *Chicago Defender*, 18 November 1933.

⁷⁵ *Chicago Defender*, 29 November 1952.

OUR PLATFORM

1. The obliteration of American race prejudice
2. Racially unrestricted membership in all trade unions
3. Equal employment opportunities in all jobs, public and private
4. True representation in all United States police forces
5. Complete cessation of all school segregation
6. Establishment of open occupancy in all American housing
7. Federal intervention to protect civil rights in all instances
where civil rights compliance at the state level breaks down⁷⁶

The emphasis the *Defender* put on its platform was another important reason that this paper was chosen for this study. Not only was the platform adhered to throughout the early life of the paper – and throughout the time this study focuses on – but it also evolved with it. When points of emphasis were met or surpassed satisfactorily, the *Defender* removed them and replaced them, if necessary, with something else important to their cause. The *Defender* originated as a fighting paper and remained a fighting paper, and never let itself or any of its readers forget its goals.

Widespread Circulation

Circulation claims are hard to quantify. Circulation is one of the key metrics that defines the success of a newspaper. Naturally, the desire to succeed can give way to embellishment. As previously noted, secondary reports on the circulation of the *Defender* vary wildly for any given period. While a passing mention to the circulation of the *Defender* in one source can go unchallenged and unnoted, gathering and analyzing numerous sources tends to highlight the discrepancies in circulation reports. This phenomenon, however, is not reserved solely for the *Defender*; the *Courier*, too, was guilty of awkward circulation reporting across secondary sources.

It is possible to build a very rough timeline if enough secondary information is gathered. The years 1915 to 1925 will be used to provide an example for the *Defender*. Roland Wolseley reported that the *Defender* had a circulation of 230,000 in 1915.⁷⁷ James Grossman reported that, in 1917, 1918, and 1919, the *Defender's* circulation was 90,000, 125,000, and 130,000, respectively. Grossman also stated that for 1918 and 1919, Roi Ottley estimated the circulation at

⁷⁶ *Chicago Defender*, 27 December 1975.

⁷⁷ Wolseley, 54.

180,000 and 230,000, respectively.⁷⁸ Roi Ottley stated that the *Defender* self-reported a peak circulation of 283,571 in 1920.⁷⁹ For the year 1925, Ottley reported the *Defender*'s circulation at 200,000.⁸⁰ For that same year, Pride and Wilson reported a circulation of 250,000.⁸¹

Figure 1: Southern Circulation of the Chicago Defender⁸²



There are at least two potential causes for these statistical misinterpretations. First and foremost, if the *Defender* is the crux of a study or paper, it behooves the writer to present the newspaper in the best light possible. High circulation numbers reinforce the importance of the *Defender*. This segues into the second reason: lack of investigation, or questionable sourcing. Roi Ottley's biography of Robert S. Abbott may not be the most qualified source of critical information relating to the *Chicago Defender*; yet many studies have cited Ottley's claims, or

⁷⁸ Grossman, 79.

⁷⁹ Ottley, 138-139.

⁸⁰ Ottley, 298.

⁸¹ Pride and Wilson, 137.

⁸² Grossman, 76-77. This figure was initially found in Grossman's *Land of Hope*. It was published on two pages, however, making a scan impossible. Attempts to procure the original failed, so a low resolution copy was taken from the internet. The labels and key were recreated as accurately as possible, but the detail of the map remains satisfactory. The scope of the *Defender*'s spread is the takeaway, though, not the presentation.

have cited Ottley indirectly.⁸³ When the same citation is used throughout different studies and attributed to different sources, it clouds the authenticity of the original information. This leads to the proliferation of numbers that, when compared to others, seem too varied to be accurate. For example, it is difficult to believe that a newspaper that was started in 1909 had a circulation of 230,000 merely six years later, as Wolseley reported. Furthermore, assuming a linear increase over those six years – which amounts to about 38,000 new readers per year – then the *Defender's* peak circulation of 1920 should be 390,000, not the 283,571 the *Defender* reported. This is, of course, all hypothetical. The secondary source reports do not lend themselves to credibility, and that is the point that is being made.

The only way to combat these inaccuracies is through the use of verified, third-party statistics. N.W. Ayer & Son, an advertising agency, published an annual directory of American newspapers that reported details of newspapers and other publications, circulation figures among them. According to the 1920 directory, N.W. Ayer & Son's American Newspaper Annual and Directory had been in existence for fifty years prior to 1920. This directory requires that newspapers self-submit their circulation figures. The directory holds a high standard, however, for receipt of circulation numbers. Typically, many newspapers forwarded to the Ayer directory the sworn figures they also reported to the Audit Bureau of Circulations, an organization that verified the circulation claims of newspapers. What this means is that the numbers that appear in the directory are, by the directory's insistence, accurate and sworn statements that should be considered true.⁸⁴

To develop an accurate picture of the circulation situation of the *Chicago Defender* and the *Pittsburgh Courier*, the circulation for each newspaper from 1920 to 1975 was drawn from these directories. Five-year intervals were used to get a general feel for the data. The circulation information for the *New York Times*, one of the most reputable and popular newspapers in the country, was drawn during the same period for the sake of comparison. The results are presented in table 1 and figure 2 (page 75 and page 76, respectively). The data present a few important findings. Firstly, these numbers in no way match the numbers reported by secondary sources.

⁸³ An indirect citation would occur as such: Study A reports X; Study B reports X, citing Study A; Study C reports X, citing Study B. By the third time X is reported, it is no longer attributed to the original study. As far as Study C is concerned, Study B has done its due diligence in reporting facts. Thus, it feels that citing Study B is the only thing necessary. Though this may not necessarily be incorrect or wrong, it can lead to the proliferation of "facts" that never intended to become facts. Citing a citation tends to lose the context of the original citation.

⁸⁴ N.W. Ayer & Son, *N.W. Ayer & Son's American Newspaper Annual & Directory: A Catalogue of American Newspapers, 1920* (Philadelphia: N.W. Ayer & Son, Inc., 1920), 4-9.

The discrepancies are vast, in some cases almost double the number reported to the Ayer directory. The causes for this are unknown, and conjecture at the cause would be hypothetical and outside the focus of this study. Another important point to note is that the *Defender* led the *Courier* when this study begins its focus. The *Courier*, however, overtook the *Defender* quite significantly. That point, however, is rendered moot by this study because the *Courier* was purchased by the *Defender* in 1965, ten years before the end of this study's focus. One final thing to note about the data is the trend presented: while most secondary sources do not vindicate the numbers reported in the Ayer directory, they both tend to follow the same pattern. Post-World War One, the numbers declined or plateaued. This lasted until the Great Depression. Then, circulation began to rise again, slowly. It peaked around 1950, and decreased steadily after that point. This trend can be seen in each of the black newspapers, but does not necessarily hold true for the *New York Times*. The *Times* is so vast that it would have been able to survive circumstances that would damage a smaller, less expansive newspaper.

Table 1: N.W. Ayer Circulation Statistics, 1920-1975 ⁸⁵						
YEAR	<i>Chicago Defender</i> ⁸⁶		<i>Pittsburgh Courier</i>	<i>New York Times</i> ⁸⁷		
1920	120,000		11,459	367,587	546,728	
1925	None reported		None reported ⁸⁸	345,149	576,321	
1930	110,000		35,700	437,367	752,689	
1935	82,000		40,920	470,853	741,564	
1940	82,059		126,962	474,277	788,997	
1945	56,534	81,701	242,275	449,409	817,960	
1950	62,474	98,534	274,329	537,216	428,540	1,096,137
1955	53,598	54,243	159,238	526,215	414,405	1,146,860
1960	30,675	43,532	126,444	614,169	478,595	1,254,635
1965	33,673	36,194	56,733	652,135	507,026	1,355,614
1970	33,320	36,458	--	899,231	723,822	1,443,738
1975	20,161	18,429	--	843,267	694,626	1,419,329

⁸⁵ The following circulation statistics were found in the annual N.W. Ayer & Son newspaper directories. The statistics were pulled for each corresponding year in the table, and each individual directory is cited in the bibliography, though without page numbers. Citations were withheld to preserve the clarity of the table.

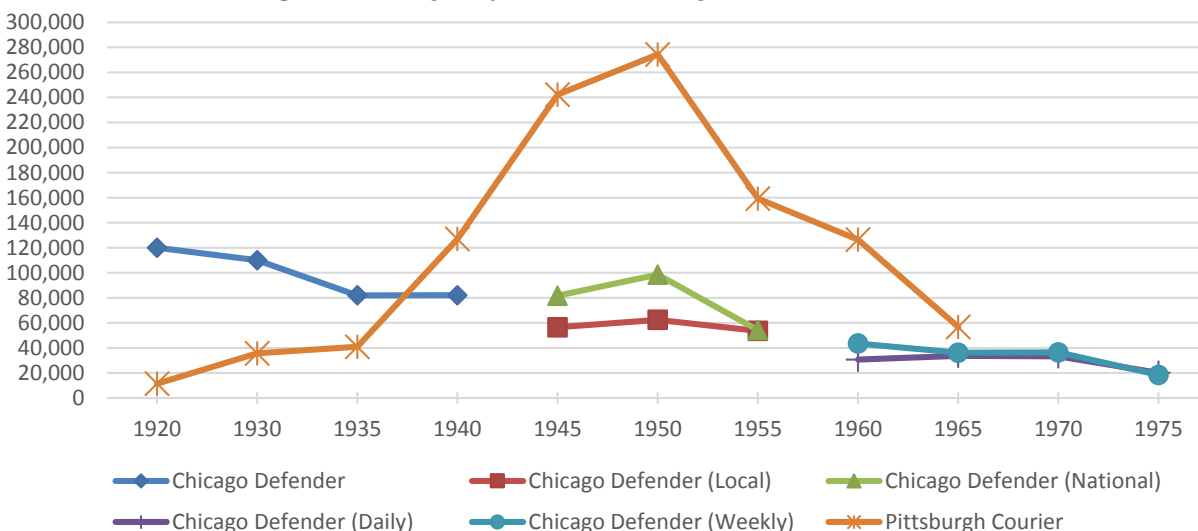
⁸⁶ In 1945, the circulation numbers for the *Chicago Defender* were reported for the local edition (left column) and the national edition (right column). In 1960, the numbers for the *Chicago Defender* were reported as the daily edition (*Daily Defender*, left column) and the regular, weekly *Chicago Defender* (right column).

⁸⁷ The New York Times initially reported the circulation of its daily edition (left column) and its Sunday edition (right column). In 1950, it began reporting its daily edition (left column), Saturday edition (middle column), and Sunday edition (right column).

⁸⁸ For the 1925 directory, there were no circulation statistics for the *Defender* or the *Courier*. There is no note in the directory explaining the missing information.

Important to note with these reported figures is that the Ayer directory defines circulation as the number of papers sold to readers. It does not take into account issues produced, only those that were sold. As mentioned earlier, one of the highlights of the *Defender* was its ambulatory nature. Ottley mentioned that one copy of the *Defender* could be shared by as many as five

Figure 2: Chicago Defender vs. Pittsburgh Courier Circulation



people.⁸⁹ For his article on Robert S. Abbott, Alan DeSantis conducted a phone interview with John Sengstacke, who claimed that every copy of the *Defender* purchased was read or heard aloud by five to seven people.⁹⁰ Circulation numbers are not necessarily what this study seeks. This study seeks a newspaper that reached individuals, making these claims of numerous people reading a single paper significant. Table 2 and figure 3 (page 77) take these claims into account, and position the “ambulatory *Defender*” against its rivals.

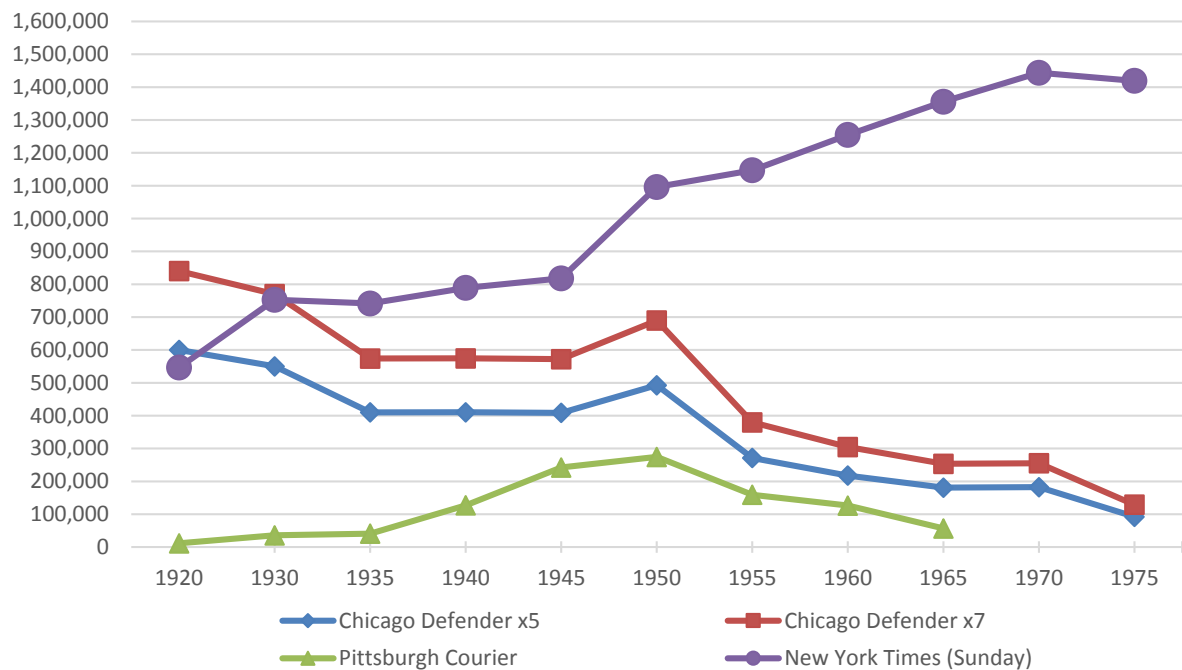
Certainly the *Defender* did not hold a monopoly on this ambulatory concept. The *Times* and the *Courier* are likely to have sold copies read by numerous people as well. What is important to note is that this ambulatory nature was central to the *Defender* as a newspaper, not an aside. The *Defender* was chosen because it was passed around within the black community like a memorandum in an office. Blacks viewed it as required reading, and this was evidenced by the fact that they made sure it was read by those who could not purchase one themselves. If someone was illiterate, then they could find places to gather and have the *Defender* read to them. The *Defender* fostered a spirit of communal knowledge, and that spirit is important to this study.

⁸⁹ Ottley, 139.

⁹⁰ DeSantis, 66.

Table 2: The “Ambulatory” <i>Defender</i>					
YEAR	<i>Chicago Defender</i> ⁹¹	<i>Chicago Defender</i> x5	<i>Chicago Defender</i> x7	<i>Pittsburgh Courier</i>	<i>New York Times</i> ⁹²
1920	120,000	600,000	840,000	11,459	546,728
1925	None reported	0	0	None reported	576,321
1930	110,000	550,000	770,000	35,700	752,689
1935	82,000	410,000	574,000	40,920	741,564
1940	82,059	410,295	574,413	126,962	788,997
1945	81,701	408,505	571,907	242,275	817,960
1950	98,534	492,670	689,738	274,329	1,096,137
1955	54,243	271,215	379,701	159,238	1,146,860
1960	43,532	217,660	304,724	126,444	1,254,635
1965	36,194	180,970	253,358	56,733	1,355,614
1970	36,458	182,290	255,206	--	1,443,738
1975	18,429	92,145	129,003	--	1,419,329

Figure 3: “Ambulatory” *Defender* vs. Rival Circulation



The *Defender* was chosen as the focus of this study because its circulation warranted it. It was spread throughout the United States. When the study commenced, it was more popular than the *Courier*. Before the period of focus of this study ended, the *Courier* was purchased by the *Defender*. If suggestions of shared copies of the *Defender* are taken seriously, then the *Defender*

⁹¹ For the sake of this comparison, the most widespread editions of the *Defender* will be used: the national edition from 1945-1955 and the weekly edition from 1960-1975.

⁹² For the sake of this comparison, the most widespread edition of the *Times* will be used: the Sunday edition.

becomes a newspaper that can compete with many white national newspapers. This theory of “newspaper sharing” and wildly misreported circulation numbers in secondary sources prove that the *Defender* had a scope and reach that was without parallel in the black community.

Sports Pedigree

Perhaps the most important reason for choosing to use the *Defender* as the backbone of this study is its sports pedigree. In a 1922 article, the *Defender* boasted it was “the newspaper which has done more for baseball and sports among our people than any three papers published.”⁹³ As one of the top black newspapers in the country, it stands to reason that the *Defender* was one of the top sports reporters. The *Defender* was an ardent supporter of the Negro Baseball Leagues, was wildly supportive of the controversial Jack Johnson, and covered all sorts of sports in which blacks were even marginally successful. Extensive coverage was given to all the greatest black athletes of their time: Jackie Robinson, Satchel Paige, Jack Johnson, Joe Louis, Muhammad Ali, Sugar Ray Robinson, Jesse Owens. Extensive coverage was also given to events involving those stars, usually in the form of a special extra edition if the magnitude of the event dictated such. Following the Louis-Carnera fight, the *Defender* bragged about releasing an 8-page extra twenty minutes after the “last flash on the fight,” which they claim was several minutes ahead of the daily papers. The *Defender* implored its readership to remind everyone else that “your Chicago Defender leads the pack.”⁹⁴ The pedigree of the *Defender* is both a concern and a product of this study; its pedigree has drawn it to this study, and its pedigree will be enhanced by this study.

⁹³ *Chicago Defender*, 7 January 1922.

⁹⁴ *Chicago Defender*, 29 June 1935. “The last flash on the fight” is assumed to mean the last flash of a camera, meaning that twenty minutes prior to the last photo being taken, the extra was on the street. Also, the “daily papers” the *Defender* is claiming victory over are the daily newspapers of Chicago, including the white newspapers. Most black newspapers tended to refer to white newspapers as “the daily papers” or “the daily press,” perhaps because most dailies were white-owned and they were comfortable making that generalization.

CHAPTER 5

The Data

To better understand and present the material, each era of investigation is divided into periods of influence. This study exists on the premise that not every fight these men fought was influential, so it stands that grouping the coverage between chosen fights is a sensible way to both research and present information. The Joe Louis Era is divided into eight periods of influence; the Muhammad Ali Era into seven. Each period is defined by a subheading providing the dates the period covers. It should be noted that the dates are inclusive. Newspaper examination of a fight begins the day after any chosen bout.

As the career of each boxer gained momentum, trends in the style and type of articles written began to emerge. These articles tended to fall into one of four categories: general news, general editorials, sports editorials, and reader contribution. As a result, this is how the data was interpreted and analyzed. Information is presented via categories. If chronology is deemed to be important, then the data is presented chronologically. The “Early Career” period of each fighter is presented distinctly and without categorization. This is because the career of each boxer had not yet yielded the substance found in the periods following their first large fight. Thus, the data of the “Early Career” periods are presented in a different manner. The way that these early fights were reported is evidence of the way the newspaper wanted to position these two men with regard to the community. By giving them early coverage, and emphasizing their early victories and potential, these men were positioned as future heroes.

The Joe Louis Era

1934-1952

You stop at a gas station to fill your tank and you
are told what a fine fellow this Joe Louis is; you pause
to buy a cold drink and again an informant comes forward
with the virtues of the Bomber. Soon you begin to think
this Joe Louis must be a hero.

-- *Chicago Defender*¹

EARLY CAREER – Kracken to Carnera; 4 July 1934 – 25 June 1935

Joe Louis was born in Alabama, moved to Detroit, and then migrated to Chicago to train and fight professionally. His first fight was at Bacon's Arena in Chicago. Of all the newspapers to cover the beginning of Louis' career, the *Defender* was the most appropriate. It was also one of the few instances where the "City Edition" of the early *Defender* produced a slight change from the "National Edition." Each edition published the same article on Louis' win in his pro debut, but on different dates. The "National Edition" published the article in the sports pages on 14 July 1934, ten days and two newspaper issues after the fight.² The "City Edition" – native to Chicago – published the article in the first edition following the fight, and also included a large headline: "JOE LOUIS WINS PRO DEBUT."³ In the grand scheme of this study, this is rather inconsequential. It does, however, reflect the current state of boxing with regard to the black community. Jack Johnson remained a "black eye" on the sport, so a dominant performance by an up-and-comer in his debut gave the black community hope.

Following Louis' debut, what was written on him can largely be described as "minutiae." Articles were printed with regard to his victories – though not in great detail. There were also articles about his upcoming bouts. After his sixth victory, there was a picture of Louis published

¹ *Chicago Defender*, 15 February 1936.

² *Chicago Defender*, 14 July 1934. See "City Edition" of *Defender*.

³ *Chicago Defender*, 7 July 1934. See "National Edition" of *Defender*.

with the heading “New Sensation.”⁴ This trend continued for his next six fights.

On 22 December 1934, Joe Louis appeared in Al Monroe’s “Speaking of Sports” column. I know little about Monroe as a person or a writer, but through my research I have ascertained that he was likely the closest thing to the lead sportswriter that the *Defender* had, at least for the Joe Louis Era. His column “Speaking of Sports” was produced almost every week and touched on happenings throughout the sporting community. It was featured prominently in the sports section of the newspaper. What values Monroe to this study is his role as a sportswriter-editorialist. His sports columns were never just a reiteration of the week’s events. Monroe normally took one issue and provided a detailed analysis. It is best to think of his column as a “sports editorial.” Sports do not always receive the respect they necessarily deserve, so it remained Monroe’s task to analyze sporting happenstance for gravity.

Monroe’s column on 22 December 1934 featured Joe Louis. He celebrated Louis as “boxing’s latest heavyweight sensation” following Louis’ twelfth consecutive win. Monroe went on – as was his penchant – to provide advice to Louis and his managers. He recommended Louis expand his “repertoire” in the ring, and not fight so often. Again, somewhat insignificant, but it highlights the rise of Joe Louis to prominence. In the same newspaper, there was a photo of Louis standing over his downed opponent with the caption “Look Out, Maxie – Louis Is Threatening.” Maxie being the reigning heavyweight champion, Max Baer. Beneath the photo ran an article titled “Detroit Gets Ready To Find Another Joe Louis.”⁵ It was written about the Golden Gloves tournament – an amateur boxing tournament held in various states, a tournament in which Louis himself had once been a champion. This was one of the first instances of the *Defender* referring to anyone of athletic merit as a “Joe Louis.” Cataloguing every instance of this would be an exhaustive process in its own right, but it continued throughout Louis’ career. The more successful he became, the more prestigious the title “Joe Louis” became. Hotshot college football players were tagged “the Joe Louis of the gridiron;” basketball players the “Joe Louis of the court.” The quest to find the next great black boxer, usually in the amateur ranks, was the quest to find the next “Joe Louis.” Most amateur boxers from Chicago and Detroit – Louis’ two “hometowns” – were referred to as “Joe Louises.” This speaks to Louis’ early influence in the black community.

⁴ “Joe Louis Fights In Detroit; After Sixth Win In Row,” *Chicago Defender*, 8 September 1934.

⁵ “Speaking Of Sports,” *Chicago Defender*, 22 December 1934.

An article on 12 January 1935, written before Louis' fourteenth fight, a match against Hans Birkie, touched on the potential for Louis to fight for the heavyweight championship. A black man fighting for the title was unique; the colour line was re-drawn following the failed Jack Johnson "experiment." Current heavyweight champion Max Baer, however, was quoted as saying: "I'll fight Joe Louis as soon as the fellow shows himself ready for title consideration."⁶ With that, Baer effectively dismissed the idea of the colour line in boxing. This is relatively profound, given the shadow of Jack Johnson that still remained. Baer – rightfully – dismissed Louis as too "green" to face the champion just yet, but did not bar him based solely on his colour. Another article was published a month later with a large headline that read: "California Predicts Title For Joe Louis."⁷

One of the first articles that showed the effect that Louis' career was having on the black community was titled "Solid South Decides Joe Louis Must Be Somebody." The article contends that Louis "skyrocketed out of obscurity to a place in the brilliant radiance of the pugilistic sun" and that he "vaulted over some barriers heretofore thought unsurmountable." The article claimed that these barriers were racial in nature. It also claimed that Louis had "shaken the South out of its lethargy."⁸

The *Defender* anointed Louis in a 4 May 1935 article. A large headline read "RISE OF JOE LOUIS IS BIGGEST SENSATION IN SPORTS HISTORY." The article elaborated on the fact that Louis was "the outstanding Race athlete of the past 30 years."⁹ Articles like these contribute to this thesis, but in an indirect way. Though it is not direct evidence of the effect Louis had on the black community, this article – and others like it – affect the way the black community positioned Louis, thus increasing any effect his actions may have had. Every time that Louis was referred to as "the greatest Race athlete" or something similar, it endeared him further to the black community, and gave his actions greater importance because he was "the greatest Race athlete."

This period finished with the approach of the Carnera fight. Articles were published where different sportswriters and past boxers – notably Harry Wills and Jack Johnson – gave their opinions on Louis. Another trend also started: the *Defender* reported on Louis' training

⁶ "Max Baer Speaks Of Louis And Chances For A Battle," *Chicago Defender*, 12 January 1935.

⁷ "California Predicts Title For Joe Louis," *Chicago Defender*, 16 February 1935.

⁸ "Solid South Decides Joe Louis Must Be Somebody," *Chicago Defender*, 13 April 1935.

⁹ "Rise Of Joe Louis Is Biggest Sensation In Sports History," *Chicago Defender*, 4 May 1935.

camp for activities in fight preparation.

Examining the *Defender* during Louis' early career, before any of his notable fights, served one purpose: to position Louis as the black community's successor to Jack Johnson, and to establish him as a legitimate and exciting candidate for "fistic supremacy." The period was largely without incident or substance. Though Louis was anointed as the "next big thing" rather early, there were no ringing endorsements from the readership or editorialists.

POST-CARNERA – Carnera to Baer; 26 June 1935 – 24 September 1935

Before continuing with the data, it is necessary to define the four categories of articles found in the Joe Louis Era, and later in the Muhammad Ali Era. Reader contribution is deemed as letters sent to the newspaper by its reader base; typically "letters to the editor." Sports editorials are any editorial pieces written by sportswriters. These typically appear in a sportswriter's column found in the sports pages. Popular sportswriters during the Louis Era were Al Monroe (who wrote "Speaking of Sports" and "It's News To Me") and Fay Young (who wrote "The Stuff Is Here," "Fay Says," and "Throughout The Years"). Some sportswriters eventually moved out of sports and began writing general news, but their work is still considered as sports editorial. General editorials are any remaining editorials found in the paper that were not relegated to the sports pages, or written by sportswriters. General news consists of the remaining fare that is neither editorial nor reader-contributed. Anything appearing on the front page of the paper, regardless of writer, is considered general news.

General News

The Carnera fight was the first big fight of Louis' career. It became a vessel for the brewing Italy-Ethiopia conflict across the Atlantic. Louis, a black man, represented the African country of Ethiopia; Carnera, the Italian, represented Italy. When Joe Louis handily defeated Carnera in six lopsided rounds, he received his first front page treatment in the *Defender*: "LOUIS MAKES RING HISTORY BY SPECTACULAR DEFEAT OF PRIMO." The title of a photograph taken at the match read "Ethiopia Stretched Forth A Hand And Italy Hit The Canvas."¹⁰ This was the first, and certainly not the last, time that Joe Louis' fight took on a symbolic note. Though it was not directly stated, this match had huge implications within the

¹⁰ "Defender Fight Extra 'Scoops' City," *Chicago Defender*, 29 June 1935.

black community. With this fight, Louis became a representative of the black community. Louis' victory over Carnera was seen as a victory over the fascist Italians. The fight was important to the black community, and the coverage in the *Defender* – notably on the front page – reflected that.

After the Carnera fight, the *Defender* began publishing more articles that made note of the effect that Louis' career had on the black community. Following the fight, they published an article titled "Joe Louis Wins; Detroit Woman Fractures Leg." When a woman learned that Louis defeated Carnera, she jumped for joy; she landed awkwardly and broke her leg.¹¹ Another article touted that Alabama, a southern state still deep in the throes of inequality, claimed Joe Louis and Jesse Owens as sons of the South.¹²

General Editorials

An editorial in the *Defender* after the Carnera fight touched on Louis being "not only a fighter of great ability but a man of character and clean habits."¹³ Another editorial was titled "Joe Louis A Good Example" and espoused many of the same tenets. Though Louis had chosen a career as a boxer, he "exemplifies patterns both in character and conduct that many men and women of other professions would do well to emulate." The editorial also claimed that Louis was instrumental "to raise in the estimation of others a wholesome and interesting respect for the race with which he is allied."¹⁴

One article was printed in which two writers "warned" Joe Louis. One writer warned Louis not to be a spendthrift like another boxer, Kid Chocolate, who "lived like a king" until his fortune was gone. The other writer echoed a similar sentiment, recommending that Louis secure the service of an honest lawyer to protect him from those after his potential fortune.¹⁵ This sentiment was expressed in the other editorials: moderation will not only save Louis' career, but it will cast him in a positive light. Jack Johnson and Kid Chocolate were not moderate, and their legacy was not preferred by the black community.

¹¹ "Joe Louis Wins; Detroit Woman Fractures Leg," *Chicago Defender*, 29 June 1935.

¹² "Alabama Rises To Claim Louis And Owens," *Chicago Defender*, 6 July 1935.

¹³ "Joe Louis Wins," *Chicago Defender*, 29 June 1935.

¹⁴ "Joe Louis A Good Example," 13 July 1935.

¹⁵ "In Which Arthur Brisbane And Corum Warn Louis," *Chicago Defender*, 6 July 1935.

Sports Editorials

The sports editorials in the Post-Carnera period offer a wealth of material. One article written by Al Monroe claimed “this Joe Louis person is the nation’s hero right now.”¹⁶ Another column pointedly touched on Louis’ position in sport:

Joe Louis has proved such an attraction that nothing in the sports world is ever thought of unless his name is mentioned in some way. Joe has become not only the most popular heavyweight boxer since the early days of Jack Dempsey, but is on the way to become a new national hero of the people, taking his place among the many heroes of the early days of American history.¹⁷

Al Monroe’s “Speaking of Sports” column was a rich source of information during the Louis Era. Two of his early columns dealt directly with the racial effect of Joe Louis’ newfound fame. In one column, Monroe positioned Louis as the “necessary tonic to bring back the big purses” in boxing. He also pointed out the racial angle of Louis’ rise. He found it difficult to comprehend how whites could continue to lynch blacks when they accept black athletes – like Louis and Jesse Owens – with open arms. Monroe stated that it is “our” opinion – our being that of the *Defender* – that the Joe Louises of the black community were “the ones who are taking the other side of the Race before the eyes of the whites. They are doing much to wipe out Jim Crow and other forms of discrimination that greet us on every turn.”¹⁸ In another column, Monroe presented an excerpt from a separate newspaper that he found important. The excerpt was a radio broadcast by a white “sports authority” who claimed that Louis was “tops with the white race” but that “colored sports fans are talking too much of the ‘racial superiority’ angle and too little of the fact that Joe Louis is a good fighter regardless of race.” The speaker finished claiming that that “is not sport.”¹⁹ This seems to be an odd inclusion by Monroe, as it counterintuitive to the desire for racial pride. Perhaps it was included to caution the black community to appreciate the efforts of Louis and not frame them as a “black vs. white” argument.

¹⁶ “Joe Louis Talks About Levinsky Bout,” *Chicago Defender*, 13 July 1935.

¹⁷ “Sport Squibs,” *Chicago Defender*, 20 July 1935.

¹⁸ “Speaking Of Sports,” *Chicago Defender*, 3 August 1935.

¹⁹ “Speaking Of Sports,” *Chicago Defender*, 24 August 1935.

Reader Contribution

With Louis' increase in popularity came an increase in reader contribution to the *Defender*. Now that Louis was gaining star status, he gained many admirers. Poems were written and sent to the *Defender*.²⁰ Many of the letters sent to the *Defender* praised some aspect of Louis' personality. One reader commented "on the fine sense of proportion that young Joe Louis has shown since his meteoric rise to fame."²¹ Another wrote in with a small thank you titled "God Bless Us And Joe Louis."²² Yet another reader praised Louis and asked "now, Joe, don't let us down. It's really pathetic the way we've been humiliated and sold out as a race."²³ Many of the other letters were simple congratulations or requests for some kind of support from Louis, usually financial. One reader positioned Louis as "a credit to our group, both North and South; say nothing about the East and West."²⁴

The most apt contribution came from a southern reader who vividly recalled "the intense bitterness and racial prejudice that attended the championship of Jack Johnson." He claimed, however, that he knew no man who did not support Joe Louis, and offered advice on how Louis could best serve his people:

He can render an immeasurable service to our people (a) practicing purity of living and letting that purity of living be publicized; (b) let him not be loquacious, but reticent and dignified; (c) let him attribute his success to the will of God, and purity of living.

I make the above observation because of the serious mistakes and harmful consequences of the actions of Jack Johnson, the former champion of the world. To state it bluntly, there is not a colored person on earth who is not less proud of his race on account of Johnson's conduct and not a white person who does not think a little less of us on account of it.²⁵

The Post-Carnera period was similar to what was seen throughout the rest of the Louis Era. Many readers wrote to the *Defender* praising Louis. Editorials depicted him as a race hero, and the *Defender* provided his fights with prominent, prioritized coverage, further bolstering the

²⁰ "Lights And Shadows," *Chicago Defender*, 10 August 1935; "A Message To Joe Louis," *Chicago Defender*, 14 September 1935.

²¹ "Joe Louis' Modesty," *Chicago Defender*, 20 July 1935.

²² "God Bless Us And Joe Louis," *Chicago Defender*, 6 July 1935.

²³ "Fan Mail Piles Up For Joe Louis, Ring Great," *Chicago Defender*, 20 July 1935.

²⁴ "Begging From Joe Louis," *Chicago Defender*, 10 August 1935.

²⁵ "Joe Can Be Of Service," *Chicago Defender*, 3 August 1935.

importance of what Louis was accomplishing inside the ring and out.

POST-BAER – Baer to Schmeling I; 25 September 1935 – 19 June 1936

General News

In the Post-Baer period, the *Defender* continued reporting on Louis' career at length and bolstering the idea that Louis' career was newsworthy. Plenty of pictures exemplified Louis with his fans; and articles tried to do the same as well. One article was coyly titled "Joe Louis Doesn't Drink Ale Or Eat Pie; Likes Red Shirts."²⁶ Other articles used provocative headlines such as "Braddock And Schmeling Appear Nervous While Watching Louis Slaughter Uzcudun" to create the image of Louis as a dangerous, top-level boxer that others feared. A 21 December 1935 article claimed Joe Louis was the number one athlete in America according to a recent poll.²⁷ Louis was ranked the number one boxer according to a poll published in *The Ring Magazine*, the definitive boxing publication.²⁸ Other articles attempted to endear Louis to the public with titles like "Joe Louis Shuns Women At Training Camp"²⁹ and "Joe Louis Gives His Mother Credit For All His Success."³⁰ Yet another article claimed that the success of Louis, his ability to draw a large crowd and large gate receipts, had effectively blocked the colour line from being drawn.³¹

As the year came to a close, an important aspect of the *Defender's* coverage came to the forefront: its year-end reviews. The newspaper re-examined the biggest events of the year that had passed. According to the *Defender*, the biggest news during 1935 was Ethiopia and Joe Louis.³² The *Defender* also ranked the fifteen most important events in 1935, with Joe Louis' "sensational rise in pugilistic circles, chosen No. 1 athlete of the year 1935" as the eighth-most important event.³³

²⁶ "Joe Louis Doesn't Drink Ale Or Eat Pie; Likes Red Shirts," *Chicago Defender*, 21 December 1935.

²⁷ "Joe Louis Is No. 1 Athlete In Sports Writers' Poll," *Chicago Defender*, 21 December 1935.

²⁸ "Place Louis Above Champ Braddock In Ring Rating,"

²⁹ "Joe Louis Shuns Women At Training Camp," *Chicago Defender*, 7 March 1936.

³⁰ "Joe Louis Gives His Mother Credit For All His Success," *Chicago Defender*, 7 March 1936.

³¹ "Louis' Draw Blocks Ring's Colour Line," *Chicago Defender*, 15 February 1936.

³² "Ethiopia And Boxing—Selassie and Louis—Provide Biggest News During Active 1935," *Chicago Defender*, 4 January 1936.

³³ "The Chicago Defender Picks The Fifteen Most Important Events In 1935," *Chicago Defender*, 4 January 1936.

General Editorials

The general editorials on Louis in the Post-Baer period were similar to those seen before. Louis was warned to “fight those three baleful ‘P’s’ that have worsted many a man—publicity, power and prosperity. That trio stopped old ‘John L’ when no fighter could.”³⁴ Another editorial was published that contradicted many of the other views held on Louis. It argued that Louis, as a boxer, was not a symbol of race progress. The author claimed that they did “not believe [prize-fights] help race relations any whatsoever.” The writer claimed that no other race views their top boxers as leaders, and that black youths should aspire to something greater than pugilism.³⁵

Sports Editorials

The sports editorials in the Post-Baer period were relatively benign. One lamented the “about-face turns over the Joe Louis heavyweight championship possibilities.”³⁶ Another touched on the promising stature of a maturing Joe Louis, who was fifteen pounds heavier than the “old” Joe Louis.³⁷ In all, there was little substance to be found in the sports editorial collection during this period.

Reader Contribution

Reader contribution to the *Defender* continued. Poems were still written to and for Joe Louis.³⁸ Opinions on Louis remained positive, but some dissention appeared. One questioned the quality of the opponents that Louis was facing.³⁹ In a similar vein, another submission claimed “Joe Louis Isn’t So Hot.”⁴⁰ The majority, however, remained encouraging. One letter asked “who will be the Joe Louis that will fight for the race in other affairs pertaining to the social order of men?”⁴¹ Another reader wrote admonishing Jack Johnson for offering to train James Braddock, a white fighter bound to face Louis, because she believed “Louis is a credit to the Race.” Yet another letter was even more critical of Jack Johnson, stating that “when Joe Louis

³⁴ “Advice To Joe Louis,” *Chicago Defender*, 5 October 1935.

³⁵ “‘Joe Louis Is No Symbol Of Race Progress,’ Says Bishop,” *Chicago Defender*, 2 November 1935.

³⁶ “Speaking Of Sports,” *Chicago Defender*, 28 December 1935.

³⁷ “Speaking Of Sports,” *Chicago Defender*, 11 January 1936.

³⁸ “Lights And Shadows,” *Chicago Defender*, 25 January 1936; “Lights And Shadows,” *Chicago Defender*, 29 February 1936; “Poems,” *Chicago Defender*, 2 May 1936.

³⁹ “‘Who Has Joe Louis Beaten?’ A Reader Asks The Question,” *Chicago Defender*, 4 January 1936.

⁴⁰ “Says Joe Louis Isn’t So Hot,” *Chicago Defender*, 11 April 1936.

⁴¹ “We Need A Joe Louis,” *Chicago Defender*, 12 October 1935.

falls, it will be before a better man and not as the result of cash to forfeit his honor and betray his race.”⁴²

POST-SCHMELING I – Schmeling I to Braddock; 20 June 1936 – 22 June 1937

General News

Despite being defeated by Max Schmeling, the *Defender* remained in Louis’ corner. Shortly after the fight, they ran a picture of Louis with the caption “although Joe Louis was defeated, his reach still covers our picture of the greatest pugilist ever to step into a ring.”⁴³ The *Defender* ran an interesting report on the front page of their 27 June 1936 issue alleging the “TRUTH ABOUT LOUIS-MAX FIASCO!” In this “special report,” they alleged that Louis was drugged in his fight against Schmeling, causing Louis’ downfall.⁴⁴ Despite the loss, the *Defender* still ranked Joe Louis as one of the top stories of 1936 in their year-end review.⁴⁵

In 1937 the *Defender* held a contest to determine the “Greatest of the Great.” They ran an advertisement asking their readers to vote for Jack Johnson or Joe Louis as the “most sensational heavyweight ever to enter a prize ring.” Cash prizes were offered.⁴⁶ The contest continued for months, with Louis’ performance in the ring dictating his popularity: convincing wins earned him more votes, less-convincing wins earned Johnson more votes.⁴⁷ In the end, the “muscular, clean living, idealistic, twenty three year–old youth, whose sensational rise in the fight game has been the ‘talk of the world’ won an overwhelming victory over Jack Johnson.”⁴⁸

General Editorials

Louis’ loss to Schmeling tempered feelings towards him, and that was reflected in the editorials. There was only one notable non-sports editorial on Louis, and it was written in regard to an upcoming Louis-Braddock match. It downplayed the importance of the match, stating it

⁴² *Chicago Defender*, 11 April 1936. The “result of cash to forfeit his honor” line was made in reference to Jack Johnson’s insistence that he was paid to throw a match against Jess Willard. As a result of the loss, Johnson lost his heavyweight championship.

⁴³ *Chicago Defender*, 27 June 1936.

⁴⁴ “Truth About Louis-Max Fiasco!” *Chicago Defender*, 27 June 1936.

⁴⁵ “Joe Louis, Haile Selassie--Most Colorful Figures In 1935, Take Tumble In 1936; Joe On Way Back Up,” *Chicago Defender*, 9 January 1937.

⁴⁶ *Chicago Defender*, 30 January 1937.

⁴⁷ “Louis Leads Johnson In Greatest Fighter Poll,” *Chicago Defender*, 6 February 1937; “Louis Vote Soars As He Whips Brown,” *Chicago Defender*, 27 February 1937.

⁴⁸ “Joe Louis Is Elected ‘Greatest Of Great,’” *Chicago Defender*, 1 May 1937.

“will not disturb the equilibrium of sane and sensible people regardless of race or nationality.”⁴⁹

Sports Editorials

Al Monroe continued writing about Louis in his weekly column, if more infrequently. In one of his first post-Schmeling columns, he continued to insist – and detail, and defend – his belief that Louis was drugged.⁵⁰ Monroe’s columns on Louis, however, were few and far between. When Louis-themed columns did appear, they usually provided another theory in regard to Louis’ defeat.

Reader Contribution

Reader contribution remained steady through the period, likely owing to the Joe Louis vs. Jack Johnson contest run by the *Defender*. Letters were written in the aftermath of Louis’ loss to Schmeling: some offered support, others remained skeptical of the outcome.⁵¹ One letter compared Joe Louis to Jesus Christ.⁵² Many readers supported the theory that Louis was drugged, or offering their own wild accusations. These letters comprised a large component of the reader contribution during this period; the remaining letters pertained to the Joe Louis-Jack Johnson debate.

POST-BRADDOCK – Braddock to Schmeling II; 23 June 1937 – 22 June 1938

General News

When Joe Louis defeated James Braddock to win the heavyweight championship, his “comeback” was almost complete. The *Defender* devoted almost all its front page to coverage of Louis’ victory.⁵³ The *Defender* believed this victory was so important that they offered to ship copies of their “special edition” of the fight coverage anywhere in America for free.⁵⁴ The *Defender* assured the public that Louis would conduct himself accordingly as champion.⁵⁵ In its year-end review, Louis’ heavyweight championship was one of the *Defender*’s “crowning

⁴⁹ “An Editorial,” *Chicago Defender*, 12 June 1937.

⁵⁰ “Speaking Of Sports,” *Chicago Defender*, 27 June 1937.

⁵¹ “Joe Took It Like A Future Champ,” *Chicago Defender*, 27 June 1936; “Doubts Honesty Of Joe-Max Bout,” *Chicago Defender*, 27 June 1936.

⁵² “Louis, Christ, Selassie,” *Chicago Defender*, 4 July 1936.

⁵³ *Chicago Defender*, 26 June 1937.

⁵⁴ “Get A Special Fight Issue Of The Defender,” *Chicago Defender*, 3 July 1937.

⁵⁵ “Louis To Conduct Self As Champion,” *Chicago Defender*, 26 June 1937.

triumphs on the year 1937.”⁵⁶

General Editorials

There were no notable non-sport editorials on Joe Louis during this period.⁵⁷

Sports Editorials

During this period, Al Monroe wrote two significant columns about Louis. One compared the new champion to his black predecessor, Jack Johnson. Monroe’s other contribution was an “open letter” to Joe Louis. It was written before the second Schmeling fight and provided Louis with advice on how to “handle Schmeling.”

Reader Contribution

There were no notable reader contributions on Joe Louis during this period.

POST-SCHMELING II – Schmeling II to Conn I; 23 June 1938 – 18 June 1941

General News

When Louis’ avenged his loss to Schmeling, the *Defender* celebrated Joe Louis as the undisputed heavyweight champion of the world.⁵⁸ The victory over Schmeling earned Louis “fighter of the year” honours from *The Ring Magazine*.⁵⁹ It also earned Louis’ inclusion in the *Defender*’s list of “big news of 1938.” The *Defender* also began a campaign to position Louis as the greatest boxer ever. A series of articles compared Louis to great boxers of the past. One article claimed his knockout record was better than Jack Dempsey’s.⁶⁰ In 1939, Louis again won “fighter of the year” honours from *The Ring Magazine*.⁶¹ Louis was also announced as an “outstanding race achiever” by the NAACP.⁶²

The *Defender* continued to promote Louis’ actions outside the ring. His campaign tour on

⁵⁶ “Crowning Triumphs Of The Year 1937,” *Chicago Defender*, 1 January 1938.

⁵⁷ This was the case at some points in this study. While it is claimed that there was nothing notable during this period based on my research, it remains a possibility that one or several articles were missed that could have been appropriate. Whenever it is claimed that there was “nothing notable,” it should be noted that it really means “I found nothing notable.”

⁵⁸ “Louis Beats Schmeling,” *Chicago Defender*, 25 June 1938.

⁵⁹ “Louis Rated Best Boxer,” *Chicago Defender*, 31 December 1938.

⁶⁰ “Louis Knockout Record Better Than Dempsey’s,” *Chicago Defender*, 7 October 1939.

⁶¹ “Louis Is Tops For 4th Time,” *Chicago Defender*, 30 December 1939.

⁶² “Announce Outstanding Race Achievers For ’39,” *Chicago Defender*, 17 February 1940.

behalf of presidential hopeful Wendell L. Willkie earned him “outstanding news stories of 1940” honours.⁶³ A large picture was published when Louis registered for the Armed Forces draft in October of 1940.⁶⁴

As Louis’ continued fighting with the threat of war looming, the *Defender* began an “open forum” campaign in 1941 that sought reader opinion on whether Joe Louis should retire as the heavyweight champion and maintain his legacy.⁶⁵

General Editorials

The general editorial posture on Louis during this period was reserved. One column touted Louis as a “sledge-hammer puncher” and considered him the hardest hitter in boxing history.⁶⁶ Another column celebrated Louis’ role in the destruction of the myth of Aryan supremacy: “The unbelieving fact concerning the Nazi superiority ballyhoo is that it has been blasted aside by Negroes more than by non-Aryans of other races. And this has been done before international witnesses.”⁶⁷

Sports Editorials

The series of articles that positioned Louis as the greatest boxer of all time were written by sports editorialists. Louis short, successful career was relived and compared to that of great boxers of the past. The final installment of the six-article series proclaimed Louis “the greatest heavyweight that ever drew on a glove” and claimed that Louis could have knocked out Jack Dempsey and beaten Jack Johnson.⁶⁸

Sports editorialists also contributed to the “open forum” on the topic of Louis’ retirement. All three of the *Defender*’s editorialists agreed that Louis should continue to fight as long as he was able.⁶⁹ The *Defender* also sought the opinion of sportswriters from some of the largest daily newspapers in America. All but one agreed that Louis should indeed retire, the title of “Joe Louis—Retired Undefeated Heavyweight Champion of the World” being too important to his

⁶³ “Outstanding News Stories Of 1940,” *Chicago Defender*, 4 January 1941.

⁶⁴ “A Few Of 463,835 Who Registered Here For Draft,” *Chicago Defender*, 26 October 1940.

⁶⁵ *Chicago Defender*, 26 April 1941.

⁶⁶ “Dustin’ Off The News,” *Chicago Defender*, 8 July 1939.

⁶⁷ “Hitler Says: ‘Black Soldiers Are Terrible’ But He Admits Germany Planned To Use Them,” *Chicago Defender*, 15 July 1939.

⁶⁸ “Is Joe Louis The Greatest Fighter Of All Time?” *Chicago Defender*, 25 March 1939

⁶⁹ “Ace Sports Writers Give Views On Question ‘Should Louis Retire?’” *Chicago Defender*, 7 June 1941.

legacy.⁷⁰

Reader Contribution

When Louis vanquished Schmeling, the man who “represented” race hatred and Aryan supremacy, readers continued communicating their support. Most readers readily accepted that Schmeling represented the Nazis, and that Louis’ victory was more than a boxing victory. A preacher wrote that he was firm in his conviction that “God was with Joe Louis in his fight with Schmeling.”⁷¹ This period also saw a large number of poems published in Louis’ honour.⁷²

The public was not completely supportive of Louis, reacting negatively to his support of Wendell Willkie’s presidential campaign. One reader recommended Louis “keep the general popular favor you have gained by keeping your politics your own business.”⁷³ Another reader respected Louis’ abilities in the ring, but believed that Louis “most certainly overstepped [himself] when [he] made such a statement without full knowledge of what [he was] talking about.”⁷⁴ Yet another reader urged Louis to “stick to your honorable profession.”⁷⁵

The remaining letters in this period dealt with the “open forum” on Louis’ retirement. Opinions were divided on the topic. One reader requested Louis retire as “undefeated champion,” thus preventing the deaths of those not able to withstand a Louis defeat.⁷⁶ A young boy wrote an open letter to Joe Louis that urged him to retire because “if you lose, it won’t be you alone, but all of the colored folks here in Hill Creek and everywhere else.”⁷⁷ A string of letters published on the topic largely agreed that Louis should “retire a good man,” claiming Louis’ retirement would be a “valuable service to the Negro universally.”⁷⁸ One letter touched on the racial implications of Louis’ career regarding retirement: “Every time you knock out a Caucasian you administer a deadly blow to “white supremacy.” Your victories lift the Race en

⁷⁰ “Sports Editors Of Largest Dailies In America Join Defender Forum On Issue ‘Should Joe Retire?’” *Chicago Defender*, 14 June 1941.

⁷¹ “Minister’s Viewpoint,” *Chicago Defender*, 23 July 1938.

⁷² “Lights And Shadows,” *Chicago Defender*, 9 July 1938; “Poems,” *Chicago Defender*, 23 September 1939; “Lights And Shadows,” *Chicago Defender*, 5 October 1940.

⁷³ “Joe Louis,” *Chicago Defender*, 9 November 1940.

⁷⁴ “Boxing King,” *Chicago Defender*, 9 November 1940.

⁷⁵ “Joe Louis,” *Chicago Defender*, 16 November 1940.

⁷⁶ “An Open Letter,” *Chicago Defender*, 19 April 1941.

⁷⁷ “An Open Letter To Joe Louis,” *Chicago Defender*, 26 April 1941.

⁷⁸ “Defender Open Forum,” *Chicago Defender*, 10 May 1941.

masse. Your defeat would erase much that you have accomplished.”⁷⁹

POST-CONN I – Conn I to Charles; 19 June 1941 – 27 September 1950

This is by far the largest gap between two fights that is examined, and with good cause: not much happened. The Second World War stole the interest of America and its press, and it also stole Joe Louis for service in the Armed Forces. Two bouts with Billy Conn and two bouts with Jersey Joe Walcott highlighted this period at a point in Louis’ career where his star was clearly fading. Nonetheless, the reaction to Louis’ contribution during the war, and his late-career fights with Conn and Walcott are still notable.

General News

Despite being named “fighter of the year” for 1941 yet again by *The Ring Magazine*, general news on Louis was not focused on his exploits in the ring.⁸⁰ More was devoted to Louis’ career in the Armed Forces and his contributions to the Navy Relief Fund. In October of 1941, an article was published stating that Louis had planned a fund to promote better race relations in America.⁸¹ When Louis volunteered to fight for the Navy Relief Fund, he had “no apologies to offer.” Louis stated he was fully aware of the implications of his decision: “I know very well what I am doing. I know there’s discrimination against my people in the navy, but I believe this is the most effective method to fight it.”⁸² For Louis’ effort for the Navy Relief Fund, Wendell Willkie stated “it is impossible for me to see how any American can think of discrimination in terms of race, creed or color.”⁸³ Similarly, Joe Louis was honoured in Congress by the Senator of Michigan for his donation of 70,000 dollars.⁸⁴

The *Defender* began yet another campaign during this period, this time with the aim of securing Louis a medal for distinguished service. They ran an article on the front page urging the government to provide Louis with recognition for his services, and also urged their readers to write to the President, the Secretary of Navy, and the Secretary of War as well.⁸⁵ In 1945, Louis

⁷⁹ “Kill White Supremacy,” *Chicago Defender*, 24 May 1941.

⁸⁰ “Louis Named ‘Fighter Of Year’ For 4th Time,” *Chicago Defender*, 3 January 1942.

⁸¹ “Joe Louis Plans Fund To Promote Better Race Relations In America,” *Chicago Defender*, 11 October 1941.

⁸² “No Apology To Make—Joe Louis,” *Chicago Defender*, 6 December 1941.

⁸³ “Willkie Praises Louis,” *Chicago Defender*, 17 January 1942.

⁸⁴ “Joe Louis Is Honored In U.S. Congress,” *Chicago Defender*, 24 January 1942.

⁸⁵ “Defender Urges Honor Medal For Joe Louis,” *Chicago Defender*, 18 April 1942.

was awarded the Legion of Merit.⁸⁶

Much of the coverage during this period was devoted to Louis' contributions to the American Armed Forces. He was positioned very favourably by the *Defender* as an American hero for his service to his country.

General Editorials

During this period, the general editorials focused on Louis' contribution to the war effort. A ringing endorsement was provided with regard to Louis' upcoming fight for the Navy Relief Fund:

Joe Louis is to fight on January 9 and risk his title with no hope of any purse in order to raise money for the Navy Relief Society, an organization which serves the United States navy personnel. Joe is doing this knowing full well that as a Negro he is barred from this department of the armed forces of America for which he is risking all that is dear to him. This gesture to democracy is the ultimate in patriotism and hope for better treatment.⁸⁷

Other editorials throughout this period followed this same trend. One editorial showed the effect Louis had on white opinion: the *Chicago Daily Times*, a white newspaper, wanted to "register the opinion that Joe is a credit to the human race" rather than trumpet the oft-repeated line that Louis was merely a credit to his own race.⁸⁸ One writer for the *Defender*, who was drafted for military service, provided an inside opinion on Louis' effect on the military: "Though he might not know it, Joe Louis certainly influenced a large number of men here to join the army."⁸⁹ After the war ended, Walter White, future leader of the NAACP, claimed that Louis contributed to a shift in racial attitudes, especially in the South.⁹⁰ One writer who, by his own admission, stayed away from sports, felt compelled to write about the growing legend of Joe Louis: "Like the legend of Atlas, Joe Louis is that rare combination, a human being and a giant rolled into one."⁹¹

When Louis retired he received adulation from editorialists. One billed him as an

⁸⁶ "Army Awards Sgt. Joe Louis Legion Of Merit," *Chicago Defender*, 29 September 1945.

⁸⁷ "Under The Last..." *Chicago Defender*, 22 November 1941.

⁸⁸ "An Exception," 31 January 1942.

⁸⁹ "Defender Writer In African Army," *Chicago Defender*, 10 October 1942.

⁹⁰ "People, Politics And Places," *Chicago Defender*, 29 June 1949.

⁹¹ "Yesterday And Today," *Chicago Defender*, 27 December 1947.

“illustrious son” alongside the likes of Booker T. Washington, George Washington Carver, and A. Philip Randolph.⁹² One editorial touched on the career of Joe Louis and finished with the line “Long Live the King of Sports.”⁹³ Columnist A.N. Fields argued that Louis was “America’s greatest youth model.” He regarded Louis “as a worthy example from any angle you might view him. He’s not only good copy for the young, but for the old, of all races. In his way of living, in his demeanor, his approach and quiet retiring manner, he has done more to solve the race question than any other man in public life today.”⁹⁴

Sports Editorials

The Post-Conn sports editorials position Louis’ career in an historic manner. Fay Young opened his 28 June 1941 column with the admission that “one of these bright days, the white sports scribes will jot down ‘Joe Louis—greatest of all heavyweight fighters in the history of the world.’”⁹⁵ In another column, Young lauded Louis’ unmatched contribution to the Navy Relief Fund, given that the money was donated to a branch of the Armed Forces that still insisted on inequality. To him, actions like this entered Louis “in the record books as the greatest heavyweight champion of the world.”⁹⁶

By the time Joe Louis announced his initial retirement, the sports editorials – largely written by Fay Young – claimed Louis was the greatest heavyweight champion of all time. Louis’ contributions to the Navy Relief Fund were seen as the epitome of his career. At a dinner held by the New York Boxing Writers Association, the former mayor of New York City, Jimmy Walker, provided a speech on Louis’ contributions:

Joe Louis, your personal conduct puts you far above the average... I think you have been the wisest of all with your comments after fights... You are a great American, a great Negro. You have made everyone proud to be an American. You have placed a red rose on Abraham Lincoln’s grave.⁹⁷

⁹² “Other Papers Say,” *Chicago Defender*, 24 September 1949. A. Philip Randolph was a leader in the civil rights movement, best known his organization and leadership of the first predominantly black labour union, the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters. George Washington Carver was a famous black scientist and inventor in the early twentieth century.

⁹³ “Our Opinions,” *Chicago Defender*, 19 March 1949.

⁹⁴ “Joe Louis, America’s Greatest Youth Model,” *Chicago Defender*, 28 May 1949.

⁹⁵ “The Stuff Is Here,” *Chicago Defender*, 28 June 1941.

⁹⁶ “Through The Years,” *Chicago Defender*, 17 January 1942.

⁹⁷ “Through The Years,” *Chicago Defender*, 31 January 1942.

After the war ended, Fay Young wrote about athletes that contributed to the Armed Forces. He was effusive in his praise of Louis: “the outstanding Negro athlete in this war, to our opinion, is Tech. Sgt. Joe Louis, the world heavyweight champion, who twice laid his title on the line for the benefit of two serviceman’s organizations.” He added that no other single individual matched the contributions and sacrifices made by Louis.⁹⁸ After Louis’ second fight against Walcott, Fay wrote that Louis remained the “fans’ hero” after he “stole the show” at a World Series game.⁹⁹

Reader Contribution

During this period readers were largely supportive of Louis’ ventures. Of his Navy Relief Fund contributions, one reader congratulated Louis on his “no apology” stand, believing that “such action taken among us will bring greater results and, I believe, quicker.”¹⁰⁰ Another reader was supportive of Louis, labelling him “a real example of the patriotic Negro who exists in this, our America.”¹⁰¹ One soldier wrote to the *Defender* claiming that he fought so that leaders of his race could continue to hold a distinct place in American history. He included Joe Louis in a list of black leaders that included Booker T. Washington and Frederick Douglass.¹⁰²

When Louis announced his retirement following his second fight with Jersey Joe Walcott, one reader expressed sadness over Louis’ retirement, but was confident that “there will never be a champ of champs like Louis.”¹⁰³ When Louis contemplated coming out of retirement, the reader base of the *Defender* responded strongly. One reader, concerned for Louis’ legacy, asked him not to fight.¹⁰⁴ Another reader, aware of Louis’ income tax troubles, suggested that Louis’ legion of fans would “gladly fight for him by paying the government the amount due.”¹⁰⁵

⁹⁸ “Big Name Athletes In Army, Navy, Marines,” *Chicago Defender*, 12 May 1945.

⁹⁹ “Fay Says,” *Chicago Defender*, 16 October 1948.

¹⁰⁰ “Brown Bomber Congratulated,” *Chicago Defender*, 10 January 1942.

¹⁰¹ “Patriot Joe Louis,” *Chicago Defender*, 17 January 1942.

¹⁰² “‘What Am I Fighting For,’” *Chicago Defender*, 21 August 1943.

¹⁰³ “Tribute To Joe Louis,” *Chicago Defender*, 7 May 1949.

¹⁰⁴ “Don’t Fight, Joe,” *Chicago Defender*, 12 August 1950.

¹⁰⁵ “Ready To Aid Joe Louis,” *Chicago Defender*, 16 September 1950.

COMEBACK AND RETIREMENT – Charles to end of study period; 28 September 1950 – 26 October 1952

General News

When Joe Louis lost his comeback attempt to Ezzard Charles, the *Defender* published a large photo spread that depicted Louis history in the ring. Louis was “acclaimed in and out of ring as great.”¹⁰⁶ With the loss to Ezzard Charles, the *Defender* – still seeking a positive light for Louis – highlighted Louis’ ability as a golfer.¹⁰⁷ Toward the end of the period, the *Defender* printed an article detailing how Joe Louis, along with two other black golfers, helped end discrimination against black golfers in the Professional Golfers Association.

General Editorials

This period saw two significant non-sport editorials. Both occurred in the wake of Louis’ loss to Ezzard Charles. The first lamented Louis’ loss to Charles, but maintained that the community remained proud of Louis.¹⁰⁸ The second upheld that “Joe Louis now is the image of greatness he wrote for history.”¹⁰⁹

Sports Editorials

Two columns by Fay Young – both in the aftermath of the Ezzard Charles defeat – appeared in this last period of the Louis Era. Each were melancholy in nature. Both disagreed with Louis’ decision to fight again after retiring, but are of little significance.¹¹⁰

Reader Contribution

The only significant reader contribution in this period positioned Joe Louis as a champion regardless of how his career ended.

¹⁰⁶ “Flashbacks On The Early Fistic Career Of Joe,” *Chicago Defender*, 7 October 1950.

¹⁰⁷ “Louis Falls In Boxing, But May Rise In Golf,” *Chicago Defender*, 7 October 1950.

¹⁰⁸ “Our Opinions: They Don’t Come Back,” *Chicago Defender*, 7 October 1950.

¹⁰⁹ “Joe Louis Now Is The Image Of Greatness He Wrote For History,” *Chicago Defender*, 14 October 1950.

¹¹⁰ “Fay Says,” *Chicago Defender*, 7 October 1950; “Fays Says,” *Chicago Defender*, 9 December 1950.

The Muhammad Ali Era

1960-1975

EARLY CAREER – Hunsaker to Liston I; 29 October 1960 – 25 February 1964

The early career of Muhammad Ali – in this case Cassius Clay – was also affected by the area in which he grew up: Louisville, Kentucky. Clay fought his first professional fight in Louisville, and his following few fights in Miami. The first mention of Clay in the *Defender* came on 11 February 1961, roughly three and a half months after he turned pro. The article alluded to Clay as the Olympic boxing champion, not a professional heavyweight with four wins. The article stated that Clay had signed to spar with Ingemar Johansson while Johansson was training for a heavyweight championship fight.¹¹¹ The next article on Clay that was found did not appear until October of the same year, and it was similarly nondescript.¹¹²

Cassius Clay's loquaciousness was the major focus during the early period of his career. The first major article that was written on Clay that was not an overview or review of a recent match was written on 14 February 1962. Foreshadowing Ali's later career, this article believed it was "refreshing to witness the arrival of heavyweight Cassius Clay to the big time." The writer of the article went on to qualify that "at least Clay has fought well enough thus far as an amateur and a professional to indicate that his fists may be able to keep pace with his tongue."¹¹³ This followed the early trend of reporting on Cassius Clay: he won his last fight, he has a rather large mouth. One article referred to Clay as "a verbal tornado;"¹¹⁴ another as "the boxer with the big

¹¹¹ "Ingo Signs Cassius Clay," *Chicago Defender*, 11 February 1961. By all accounts, this is the first available mention of Clay/Ali during the "Early Career" period. This was the first article found in the microfilm search, as well as the first article found in the indexed search as well.

¹¹² "Clay Seeks Bout With Heavy," *Chicago Defender*, 10 October 1961.

¹¹³ "Tommy's Corner," *Chicago Defender*, 14 February 1962.

¹¹⁴ "Clay Confident Of KO Win Over Banks Saturday Night," *Chicago Defender*, 7 February 1962.

mouth;”¹¹⁵ yet another as “the braggadocia.”¹¹⁶ The public was conscious of Ali’s verbal acumen. Joe Louis was given the nickname “The Brown Bomber” because of his thunderous punching ability; Muhammad Ali was given the nickname “The Louisville Lip” because of the amount of talking he did. Ali’s career was framed by his “lip,” and it was present in all future analysis of Ali’s actions.

Though Clay’s mouth received most of the attention, his boxing skills also drew regard. The *Defender* reported that *The Ring Magazine* named Clay the fighter of the month for July in 1962.¹¹⁷ There was plenty of doubt in Clay’s skill early in his career – articles titled “Cassius Has Tools But They Need Sharpening”¹¹⁸ and “Clay Wins But Looks Bad Doing It!”¹¹⁹ appeared. As Clay’s win totals increased, so too did confidence in his boxing ability. Sportswriters still doubted his ability to compete with heavyweight champion Sonny Liston, despite reporting that Clay was fighter of the month again in November in 1962.¹²⁰ The public, however, was keen on Clay, and for two reasons. The first reason was, as Al Monroe wrote, that boxing fans preferred “anybody but Sonny Liston” because Liston was rumoured to be “persona grata” with the mob.¹²¹ The second reason was that the public actually seemed to enjoy his antics, with early reader submissions supporting this. One reader wrote a letter to the paper titled “Clay Is That Good,” claiming “the only reason [Clay] talks as big as he does is because he happens to be that good.”¹²² The reader feedback was not always positive, however. One reader submitted an open letter to the *Defender* titled “Ode To Cassius.” In it, the reader accused Clay of committing “a gross disservice to the race” by negatively referring to the physical appearance of Sonny Liston and Doug Jones. The reader claimed that both fighters have the physical appearance standard of other blacks, and that Clay’s negative portrayal of said appearance can only be detrimental to blacks as a whole.¹²³

The data found at the end of the early career period dealt with Clay’s draft prospects. Two articles were written that stated that Clay was worried about his draft status, but not his

¹¹⁵ “Sportsville, L.A.,” *Chicago Defender*, 4 August 1962.

¹¹⁶ “So They Say,” *Chicago Defender*, 19 November 1962.

¹¹⁷ “Cassius Clay Named Fighter Of Month,” *Chicago Defender*, 4 August 1962.

¹¹⁸ “Cassius Has Tools But They Need Sharpening” *Chicago Defender*, 18 March 1963.

¹¹⁹ “Clay Wins But Looks Bad Doing It!” *Chicago Defender*, 21 May 1963.

¹²⁰ “Cassius Clay Named Fighter Of The Month,” *Chicago Defender*, 29 November 1962.

¹²¹ “What About ‘The Lip’ As Heavyweight King?” *Chicago Defender*, 30 July 1963.

¹²² “Clay Is That Good,” *Chicago Defender*, 26 November 1962.

¹²³ “The People Speak: Ode To Cassius,” 1 April 1963.

upcoming fight with Sonny Liston.¹²⁴ It was standard Clay: no fear of his opponent, but this established background for the controversy that surrounded Ali's draft status years later.

This early period in Ali's career established the trend that continued throughout: Ali became known for his bombastic flair, and it polarized readers and writers alike. Ali possessed a style of boxing that differed from most fighters and it was questioned until it was tested against a champion-calibre opponent. Examining this period serves the purpose of defining the creation of the polarizing figure that was Muhammad Ali.

POST-LISTON I – Liston I to Patterson I; 26 February 1964 – 22 November 1965

General News

After Cassius Clay won the heavyweight championship, the general news headlines reflected the position he held in society. Nearly all the articles dealt with Clay's draft potential or his new religion. Clay only fought twice in this period, both fights with Sonny Liston as his opponent. Still, most of the general news stories dealt with Clay's life outside the ring. One reported that Clay and Malcolm X were planning to form a new religious organization together.¹²⁵ Others dealt with Clay's uncertainty in his future plans due to his failed draft board test.¹²⁶ The opinion of Sammy Davis Jr., popular singer and entertainer, on the topic of Clay's decision to join the Black Muslim movement: "Cassius Clay's decision and his comments on the color problem have set back all we have been fighting for 100 years."¹²⁷

General Editorials

Cassius Clay's conversion to the Nation of Islam gave editorialists plenty of non-sports material to discuss. One editorial asked the question, "Are 'Black Muslims' the same thing as the Ku Klux Klan?"¹²⁸ Another editorialist wrote that this period was "boxing's last round." He claimed that boxing was dying of its own decay, and that interest would wane with the Clay-Liston fight passed.¹²⁹

¹²⁴ "Draft, Not Liston Worries Clay." *Chicago Defender*, 30 December 1963. "Oh No, Clay Worried? Yes, But It's Over His Draft Status, Not Liston," *Chicago Defender*, 27 January 1964.

¹²⁵ "Report Clay, Malcolm X Plan New Organization," *Chicago Defender*, 2 March 1964.

¹²⁶ "Not Able To Run, Or Use Fists Clay Flunks Draft Board Test," *Chicago Defender*, 11 March 1964; "Cassius Clay Uncertain About Future Plans Until Army Talks," *Chicago Defender*, 16 March 1964.

¹²⁷ "Sammy Says Clay 'Set Us Back,'" *Chicago Defender*, 12 March 1964.

¹²⁸ "A Stone's Throw," *Chicago Defender*, 5 March, 1964.

¹²⁹ "Only In America," *Chicago Defender*, 16 May 1964.

Sports Editorials

The primary sportswriters of this era were different from the Louis Era. Al Monroe maintained a column titled “So They Say” for a very brief period of time. For the most part the prominent sportswriters were Lee D. Jenkins, Norman O. Unger, Jackie Robinson¹³⁰ (who wrote “Jackie Robinson Says”), and A.S. “Doc” Young (who wrote “Good Morning, Sports!”). A.S. “Doc” Young was by far one of the most important sources of information on Ali during this era.

Sportswriters began a trend of critical appraisal during this period. Clay’s actions offended the sensibilities of many blacks, including the sportswriters at the *Defender*. Al Monroe offered advice to the newly minted Cassius X in one of his columns: not to let the Black Muslims influence him in refusing white contenders a shot at the championship.¹³¹ Other columns took a similar approach. They touched on Clay’s move to the Black Muslims and what it could mean for boxing. They largely supported Clay during this time, as well. Jackie Robinson stated that he did not support the Black Muslim cause, but supported Clay’s decision because it was Clay’s to make.¹³² Most agreed that, despite Clay’s pompous nature, his drawing power had the potential to benefit the sport of boxing, which found itself in a slight recession.

Reader Contribution

The reader base of the *Defender* supported Clay during this time. One reader wrote that Clay was entitled to his own beliefs, regardless of what they may be.¹³³ Numerous others echoed that sentiment. Another reader believed Clay’s sojourn as a Black Muslim was of no consequence: “Black Muslim or not Cassius Clay is the same young, delightful, boastful guy who made people laugh, before he told us he was a Muslim.”¹³⁴ Yet another reader lauded Clay’s racial views, saying that “more Negroes should believe themselves capable of doing for themselves” the way Clay did.¹³⁵

¹³⁰ Yes, it was that Jackie Robinson, of Brooklyn Dodger fame.

¹³¹ “Little Advice For Cassius X,” *Chicago Defender*, 12 March 1964.

¹³² “Jackie Robinson Says,” *Chicago Defender*, 4 April 1964.

¹³³ “A Boxing Champ, Nothing Else,” *Chicago Defender*, 4 April 1964.

¹³⁴ “Muslim Or Not Clay Still Delightful,” *Chicago Defender*, 9 April 1964.

¹³⁵ “Lauds Cassius’ Racial Views,” *Chicago Defender*, 23 May 1964.

POST-PATTERSON I – Patterson I to Exile; 23 November 1965 – 28 April 1967

General News

In the period following Ali's first fight with Floyd Patterson to his eventual exile, the general news on Ali expressed a distinct duality. Ali was praised for his boxing abilities. He was selected the "fighter of the year" for 1965.¹³⁶ The following year he was named "sportsman of the year" in Europe.¹³⁷ He was given many other honours extolling his performance in the ring as well.

Outside of the ring, the most popular story was Clay's fight with the draft board. When it was reported that Clay had been reclassified 1-A status, he faced induction into the Armed Forces.¹³⁸ When he was inducted, he refused and planned to appeal on religious grounds.¹³⁹ The resulting battle between Clay and the draft board encompassed much of the general coverage of Ali's career during this period. Ali was called out by other boxers for his actions – Ernie Terrell referred to him as "some kind of punk."¹⁴⁰ Other black leaders were quick to dissociate themselves with Clay. The head of the National Urban League, a civil rights organization, said Clay did not belong in a list of "responsible Negro leaders."¹⁴¹

General Editorials

There was only one general editorial deemed noteworthy during this period, and it was supportive of Ali. The author argued that America should love Ali, not hate him, because he was a "living symbol of Puritanism, old fashioned Puritanism."¹⁴²

Sports Editorials

Lee D. Jenkins opened this period with an article critical of all those who opposed Clay, who by this period went strictly by Muhammad Ali. He believed that it was Ali's mouth and religion that prevented him from being accepted, not his boxing ability. Jenkins argued that America was "in the midst of a social revolution that asks that a man be judged by his abilities.

¹³⁶ "Cassius Clay Selected 'Fighter Of The Year,'" *Chicago Defender*, 16 December 1965.

¹³⁷ "'Sportsman' Award Goes To Cassius," *Chicago Defender*, 10 December 1966.

¹³⁸ "Cassius Nears Induction," *Chicago Defender*, 14 February 1966.

¹³⁹ "Clay To Fight Induction," *Chicago Defender*, 21 February 1966.

¹⁴⁰ "'Clay Some Kind Of Punk,'" *Chicago Defender*, 17 January 1967.

¹⁴¹ "Cassius Not Negro Leader, Says Young," *Chicago Defender*, 27 November 1965.

¹⁴² "Only In America," *Chicago Defender*, 19 March 1966.

Can it be that the heavyweight champion of the world is outside this realm of equality?”¹⁴³ Jackie Robinson also came to the defense of Ali, saying he “might just be one of the greatest heavyweight champions this country has ever produced.”¹⁴⁴

A.S. “Doc” Young, however, began a long campaign of critique with regard to Ali. In one column, Young condemned Ali’s desire to “torture” his opponents. He pointed out that Cassius Clay had a multitude of names, none of which included “another Joe Louis.”¹⁴⁵ Young also began, and continued, a long trend whereby he refused to refer to Muhammad Ali as Muhammad Ali, preferring to refer to him as Cassius Clay. In another column, Young referred to Ali as “Mr. MACC” (Muhammad-Ali-Cassius-Clay) and provided a very direct message to Ali:

Don’t get the idea that you’re carrying the Negro race. It is the other way around. The Negro race is carrying you. It is irrefutable proof of the ever-growing maturation of democracy in sports that we are, in 1967, able to pack all this dead weight. It really would have been brutal if your name had been Joe Louis... or Jackie Robinson.¹⁴⁶

Reader Contribution

Readers supported Ali following his defeat of Floyd Patterson. One reader was offended by Patterson’s claim to represent America in his fight against Ali.¹⁴⁷ Another agreed with Ali’s assertion that Patterson was a “white black man,” stating that no matter how Ali dispatched Patterson, Ali would have received negative attention.¹⁴⁸

SUSPENSION – Exile to Frazier I; 29 April 1967 – 8 March 1971

General News

Following his suspension by boxing authorities for his refusal to enter the Armed Forces, the news coverage of Ali focused solely on the heated battle between Ali and the draft board. Articles appeared every week discussing Ali’s new life outside the ring. The entire journey was covered at length, from Ali’s appeal of his conviction, to the details of the trial and appeals, to

¹⁴³ “Cassius’ Mouth, Religion Prevent Acceptance,” *Chicago Defender*, 27 November 1965.

¹⁴⁴ “Defends Cassius, Rates Him ‘Tops,’” *Chicago Defender*, 11 March, 1967.

¹⁴⁵ “Good Morning, Sports!” *Chicago Defender*, 16 March 1967.

¹⁴⁶ “Good Morning, Sports!” *Chicago Defender*, 28 March 1967.

¹⁴⁷ “Blasts Fighter’s Remarks,” *Chicago Defender*, 4 December 1965.

¹⁴⁸ “Patterson Lamented By Whites,” *Chicago Defender*, 18 December 1965.

Ali's temperament as an ex-boxer, and current minister.¹⁴⁹

General Editorials

There were no notable non-sport editorials on Muhammad Ali during this period.

Sports Editorials

The sports editorials in this period provided the richest source of material in this study. Doc Young was indelibly outspoken and critical of Ali during this period. On 2 May 1967, mere days after Ali refused induction, Young wrote a piece for his column titled "Black Day For Boxing." He pointed out that Ali (or Clay-Ali, as he referred to him) waited quite long to make his stand as a "Black Muslim minister," and that he viewed Ali's position as having no patriotic basis.¹⁵⁰ Later, he argued that Ali was "not the hero he and the Black Muslims like to think he is," pointing out that if sorrow must be felt, it should be for those "gallant lads, many of whom are just as religious as [Ali], who answered their country's call affirmatively."¹⁵¹ Young also addressed the "Uncle Tom" accusations that had been levelled against Joe Louis:

The attempt to depreciate the qualities that made Joe Louis great – including his willingness to accept military orders – is one of the cheapest, meanest acts of all time. This act, when incorporated with an attempt to deify Cassius Clay, is fraudulent, dishonest, and a gross insult to the intelligence of millions of people – Negro, white, polkadot – the world over.¹⁵²

Young pulled no punches in his assessment of Ali. In one column, titled "Saddest Sights Of All," he included "Cassius Clay-Muhammad Ali turning his back on his country" as one of those sad sights.¹⁵³ In another column, Young lamented blacks advocating the "principles" of white bigotry. Ali had been speaking on behalf of the Nation of Islam, supporting their segregationist policies, and Young was astonished:

¹⁴⁹ Hundreds of articles were published on Ali's journey from draft dodger to reinstated boxer. None of them were deemed to require any distinct citation, though; the general trend is the important thing to take away from the stories.

¹⁵⁰ "Good Morning, Sports!" *Chicago Defender*, 2 May 1967.

¹⁵¹ "Good Morning, Sports!" *Chicago Defender*, 6 June 1967.

¹⁵² "Good Morning, Sports!" *Chicago Defender*, 23 August 1967.

¹⁵³ "Good Morning, Sports!" *Chicago Defender*, 17 April 1968.

I never thought I'd see the day, either, when a boxer, possessing no real expertise in this area, would be invited to college campuses to speak on racial matters to impressionable kids. But, apparently, Muhammad Ali is in some demand for such appearances. And, running true to form, he is promoting a line which should earn him a trophy from the Ku Klux Klan.¹⁵⁴

When it came time to discuss the athlete of the year for 1970, Young made mention of "C.C. Muhammad Ali," though only because "he'll sell out the banquet."¹⁵⁵ When Young was asked by a reader about his all-time favourites, he listed "Cassius Clay" as the second best heavyweight he had ever witnessed, but ranked Joe Louis as the greatest heavyweight of all time, and ranked Louis and Jackie Robinson as the two athletes most valuable to the racial cause.¹⁵⁶

Other sportswriters were not nearly as critical as Young during this period. Jackie Robinson touched on the heroism and tragedy of Ali's refusal to accept induction. The tragedy, though, in Robinson's mind, existed because Ali allowed himself to be used.¹⁵⁷ This was another popular sentiment: though many were not as critical as Young, there existed the belief that Ali was being used by the Nation of Islam and its handlers.

Reader Contribution

One reader supported Ali's stand against his induction, claiming "in this war, to be patriotic is idiotic."¹⁵⁸ Another reader, questioned Doc Young's fixation on Muhammad Ali as bordering on "morbidly insane."¹⁵⁹ On 27 February 1971, one reader submitted a poem to the *Defender* in which he predicted Ali's defeat at the hands of Frazier in their upcoming match.¹⁶⁰ Despite the serious nature of Ali's suspension, there was a conspicuous absence of reader submissions compared to the amount of other material produced.

POST-FRAZIER I – Frazier I to Norton I; 9 March 1971 – 28 January 1974

General News

When Ali lost to Joe Frazier, the *Defender* ran an article on the front page titled "JOE

¹⁵⁴ "Good Morning, Sports!" *Chicago Defender*, 25 February 1969.

¹⁵⁵ "Good Morning, Sports!" *Chicago Defender*, 27 January 1971.

¹⁵⁶ "Good Morning, Sports!" *Chicago Defender*, 7 December 1970.

¹⁵⁷ "Heroism, Tragedy Of Muhammad Ali," *Chicago Defender*, 21 October 1967.

¹⁵⁸ "Patriotism Is Called Idiotic," *Chicago Defender*, 20 May 1967.

¹⁵⁹ "Writer's Views Of Ali Irks Reader," *Chicago Defender*, 11 November 1967.

¹⁶⁰ "Predicts Ali's Fall," *Chicago Defender*, 27 February 1971.

WINS!”¹⁶¹ Many of the articles following that, however, still dealt with the results of Ali’s overturned conviction and suspension. One article stated the court victory brightened the image of Black Muslims.¹⁶² Ali used his court victory as a soapbox, stating he was going to liberate all “his people.”¹⁶³ Despite Ali’s “good-natured” intentions, a survey was published that showed that Ali was among the most well-known athletes in America, while also being among the least likeable, the least trusted, and the least respected based on talent.¹⁶⁴

General Editorials

There was only one general editorial of note during this period. The author, Frank L. Stanley, claimed boxing owed a debt to Muhammad Ali for making boxing what it was. He believed that, prior to the arrival of Ali, boxing was dead. He positioned Ali as a great fighter and a great man, who lived clean, loved his family, and was devoted to his beliefs. What made this article interesting was that Stanley also claimed to be the man that consoled Cassius Clay when his bicycle was stolen as a child. He took credit for taking Clay to meet “Policeman Martin,” who then introduced Clay to the sport of boxing.¹⁶⁵

Sports Editorials

During this period, Norman O. Unger wrote a series of articles about the career of Ali. They examined the “new-found popularity of boxing since the arrival of Muhammad Ali.” The series finished with the “end” of Ali as “the greatest” following his loss to Frazier.¹⁶⁶ Unger was never expressly critical of Ali; he merely presented Ali’s career as it appeared following a career-defining loss. He followed up this series of articles years later, after a second loss to Ken Norton, with a piece titled “Ali, the legend, has fallen.” He compared the decline of Ali to the fall of Rome: “The fall of the Roman Empire couldn’t have hurt Romulous Augustulus as much as losing to Ken Norton hurt Muhammad Ali.”¹⁶⁷

Doc Young remained ever critical of Ali, though not nearly as outspoken. He accused Ali

¹⁶¹ “Joe Wins!” *Chicago Defender*, 9 March 1971.

¹⁶² “Says Ali Victory Brightens Muslim Image,” *Chicago Defender*, 30 June 1971.

¹⁶³ “I’m Going To Liberate All My People, Ali Pledges,” *Chicago Defender*, 29 June 1971.

¹⁶⁴ “Musial Take Tops In Athlete Survey,” *Chicago Defender*, 20 December 1973.

¹⁶⁵ “Being Frank,” *Chicago Defender*, 20 march 1971.

¹⁶⁶ “Ali, ‘The Greatest’ Era Ends,” *Chicago Defender*, 30 March 1971.

¹⁶⁷ “Ali, The Legend, Has Fallen,” *Chicago Defender*, 2 April 1973.

of a conducting a “con game” in refusing to set up a rematch with Joe Frazier in a timely manner.¹⁶⁸ As late as 15 February 1973, Young still refused to refer to Ali without the added connotation of Cassius Clay, still preferring a hyphenate “Cassius Clay-Muhammad Ali” or “Clay-Ali.”¹⁶⁹

Reader Contribution

There was only one notable reader submission during this period. The letter was critical of Elijah Muhammad, leader of the Nation of Islam, and his back-and-forth relationship with Ali. The reader pointed out the hypocrisy of Elijah Muhammad controlling Ali’s money, while Elijah Muhammad also criticized Ali for wanting to box to support himself.¹⁷⁰

POST-FRAZIER II – Frazier II to Foreman; 29 January 1974 – 30 October 1974

General News

Ali-Frazier II was dubbed a “Super Fight” by the *Defender*.¹⁷¹ Though no championship was won or lost in the match, Ali declared himself the “Peoples’ Champion” afterwards.¹⁷² The *Defender* later christened him “one of a kind.”¹⁷³ There was not much general news in this short period, and what news there was seemed to focus solely on Ali’s career inside the ring.

General Editorials

There were no notable non-sport editorials on Muhammad Ali during this period.

Sports Editorials

Following Ali’s victory over Frazier in their much-anticipated rematch, Young accused Ali of playing “black people cheaply.” He accused Ali of talking too much about “helping his people,” and insinuated that Ali’s desire to help was nebulous. According to Young, those who “intend” to help go out and act on those intentions, rather than talk about acting, of which Young

¹⁶⁸ “Good Morning, Sports!” *Chicago Defender*, 6 June 1972.

¹⁶⁹ “Good Morning, Sports!” *Chicago Defender*, 15 February 1973.

¹⁷⁰ “Takes Issue,” *Chicago Defender*, 9 March 1971.

¹⁷¹ “Ali Wins ‘Super Fight,’” *Chicago Defender*, 29 January 1974.

¹⁷² “People’s Champ Offers ‘Title’ To All,” *Chicago Defender*, 31 January 1974.

¹⁷³ “Is Ali One Of A Kind” *Chicago Defender*, 13 April 1974.

accused Ali.¹⁷⁴ When a heavyweight championship match with Foreman was arranged, Young firmly believed that Ali was outmatched.¹⁷⁵ Young conceded, though, that if Ali were to defeat Foreman, he would agree that Ali “is some kind of great one. Mouth and all!”¹⁷⁶

Going into the Foreman bout, other sportswriters remained divided on Ali. They viewed Ali-Frazier II as a delightful boxing match, but it lacked the championship dimension to give purpose to Ali’s career.

Reader Contribution

There was one letter from a reader during this period that was deemed notable. The reader claimed to have supported Ali when he abandoned his “slave name,” through his clowning, and even when he was expelled from the Nation of Islam. The reader stated that his treatment of Joe Frazier was inexcusable, however, and it had prompted him to again refer to Ali by his slave name of “Cassius Clay.”¹⁷⁷

POST-FOREMAN – Foreman to end of study period; 31 October 1974 – 31 December 1975

General News

Despite the relatively short length of this period, covering only “The Rumble in the Jungle” against George Foreman, there was considerable news published on Ali. With his reclaiming of the heavyweight championship, Ali was said to have proved his point as the “greatest,” having beaten the “biggest for the crown.”¹⁷⁸ Ali was praised in the pages of the *Defender* after becoming only the second boxer to win the heavyweight title twice. He was named the “sportsman of the year” for 1974.¹⁷⁹ It was said his destiny “couldn’t be denied.”¹⁸⁰ He was shown “hob-nobbing” with the President.¹⁸¹ The D.C. Chamber of Commerce labeled Ali “the greatest athlete of the century,” despite only three quarters of the century having elapsed.¹⁸² This period represented a definite shift in the portrayal of Ali. Suddenly, Ali was a

¹⁷⁴ “Good Morning, Sports!” *Chicago Defender*, 6 February 1974.

¹⁷⁵ “Good Morning, Sports!” *Chicago Defender*, 2 April 1974.

¹⁷⁶ “Good Morning, Sports!” *Chicago Defender*, 24 September 1974.

¹⁷⁷ “Show Stopped,” *Chicago Defender*, 27 March 1974.

¹⁷⁸ “Ali Proves Point As The Greatest,” *Chicago Defender*, 31 October 1974; “Ali Beat The Biggest For The Crown,” *Chicago Defender*, 2 November 1974.

¹⁷⁹ “‘Sportsman Of Year’ To Ali,” *Chicago Defender*, 19 December 1974.

¹⁸⁰ “Ali’s Destiny Couldn’t Be Denied,” *Chicago Defender*, 28 December 1974.

¹⁸¹ “Ali Ribs President At White House,” *Chicago Defender*, 11 December 1974.

¹⁸² “D.C. Solons Named Ali ‘Athlete Of Century,’” *Chicago Defender*, 25 February 1975.

“symbol” to blacks.¹⁸³ It was said Ali fought for poor blacks.¹⁸⁴ Ali was now a “moral man,” the “King” with a “big heart.”¹⁸⁵

General Editorials

There were two notable editorials in this final period during the Ali Era. The first examined the year of 1974. The author believed that Ali had proven himself the greatest heavyweight prizefighter, and stated that he believed that Ali would surpass Joe Louis’ accomplishment of holding the heavyweight title for eleven years.

The second editorial appraised Muhammad Ali, specifically, Ali as a man of God. The writer questioned many of the ways in which Ali carried and presented himself, but qualified it by stating that Ali was not just a prizefighter, but the representative of a religion.¹⁸⁶

Sports Editorials

Doc Young did not relent in his opinion of Ali following Ali’s defeat of Foreman. He claimed that, if Ali was correct in his assessment of George Foreman being “nuthin’,” then Ali was now the “King of Zero.”¹⁸⁷ Despite his ring acumen, Young still believed Ali to be a “black buffoon” who had done nothing for their race:

Ali can’t carry Jackie Robinson’s sweatshirt. He is not in a class with Joe Louis. He shouldn’t be mentioned in the same library, not to mention the same sentence, with such black giants—who happened at one time to be athletes—as Dr. Ralph Bunche, Rev. Jesse Jackson, Paul Robeson, and Ralph Metcalfe, to name four.¹⁸⁸

Norman O. Unger seemed to agree with Doc Young. He wrote that Ali’s victory over Foreman was not convincing, and that a rematch was necessary.¹⁸⁹ Of Ali-Frazier III, he predicted Joe Frazier, who gave up “height, reach, weight, and experience” to Ali would emerge victorious.¹⁹⁰

¹⁸³ “Black Promoter Says Ali Is A Symbol,” *Chicago Defender*, 14 June, 1974.

¹⁸⁴ “Ali Says He Fights For Poor Blacks,” *Chicago Defender*, 22 September 1975.

¹⁸⁵ “Ali Yaps Like A Moral Man,” *Chicago Defender*, 29 September 1975; “Ali Still ‘King,’ But ‘Ring’ Foes Hard To Find,” *Chicago Defender*, 18 October 1975; “Muhammad Ali’s Big Heart,” *Chicago Defender*, 20 December 1975.

¹⁸⁶ “The Great Distance Between The Heart And The Mouth,” *Chicago Defender*, 12 June 1975.

¹⁸⁷ “Good Morning, Sports!” *Chicago Defender*, 13 November 1974.

¹⁸⁸ “Good Morning, Sports!” *Chicago Defender*, 19 November 1974.

¹⁸⁹ “Ali’s Victory Was Not That Convincing,” *Chicago Defender*, 2 November 1974.

¹⁹⁰ “Frazier To Beat Odds, Snatch Crown From Ali,” *Chicago Defender*, 30 September 1975.

Reader Contribution

There were two notable letters published from readers in this final period. One declared Ali to be the “people’s champ” that had risen again.¹⁹¹ The other charged Ali with being “a black racist and an idiot.”¹⁹²

The purpose of this chapter was to present all the data found in the *Chicago Defender*. It is divided into different eras and periods for better organization and reference. Analysis will occur in the following chapter.

¹⁹¹ ““People’s Champ,”” *Chicago Defender*, 13 November 1974.

¹⁹² “Symbol Of Idiocy,” *Chicago Defender*, 13 October 1975.

CHAPTER 6

Conclusion And Epilogue

INTERPRETATION AND ANALYSIS

The Joe Louis Era

The data collected in this study show that the career of Joe Louis had a positive impact on civil rights and race relations in the United States from the viewpoint of the black community, as interpreted through a qualitative analysis of the content provided by the *Chicago Defender*.

Three trends repeatedly appeared in the *Defender's* coverage that support this: the legacy of Louis' career, the comparisons of Louis to Jack Johnson, and Louis' contributions to his country.

Joe Louis' career had a positive impact on race relations because Louis' success came at a time when blacks were marginalized and were still victim to the colour barrier in numerous sports. Not only did Joe Louis successfully cross the colour line to become the heavyweight champion, he became one of the most successful heavyweights of all time, drawing the praise of whites and blacks alike. Louis' success in the ring helped foster positive relations with the white community, and the numerous attestations to that in the *Defender* are seen in Chapter 5. Louis' success also gave the black community a role model and someone to admire.

The comparisons of Joe Louis to Jack Johnson also had a positive effect on race relations. Jack Johnson was seen as a curse by whites, and even some blacks. His reign as the first heavyweight champion was the reason that the colour line was re-drawn in boxing. The *Defender* itself often praised Jack Johnson's achievements, but his personality and mannerisms earned him the scorn of many people. The only thing in Joe Louis' life that resembled Jack Johnson's was

the heavyweight championship, and this was a positive for Louis. Whereas Jack Johnson was seen as the stereotypical black man, Louis broke that mold by living a clean, modest life. Much of the material gathered from the *Defender* praised Louis for his positive lifestyle. Numerous editorials and reader contributions trumpeted him as a role model for blacks and whites alike. It was Louis' non-descript and honourable lifestyle that endeared him to the white community. This, along with Louis' dominant reign as heavyweight champion, allowed the white community to accept a black man as an equal. Numerous articles were published in the *Defender* that proved this to be true. As well, readers wrote letters to the *Defender* praising Louis for his mannerisms and for the excellent example he set. Many readers and writers also begged Joe to remain steadfast in his honest ways and to continue to make his people proud. Unlike Johnson, Joe Louis was truly a "credit to his race" as many blacks and whites frequently professed.

One of the most important ways in which Louis positively affected race relations was through his service to his country. This took two routes: symbolic boxing matches, and wartime contributions. Joe Louis' fight against Primo Carnera took on extraneous significance, just like his famous battles with Max Schmeling. Each time Louis faced off against the forces of alleged fascism. Each victory was a victory for America. This further endeared Louis to his American brethren. When World War Two broke out, Louis enlisted rather than waiting to be drafted. Other athletes enlisted in the Armed Forces, but few contributed on the same scale as Joe Louis. The reigning heavyweight champion, Louis defended his title twice during the war, with the proceeds of each fight donated to help fund the war effort. He also fought numerous exhibitions. This was seen as the ultimate act of patriotism, and for good reason. Joe Louis was a black man, and as a black man he faced potential disenfranchisement in America. Segregation still existed in the Armed Forces during the Second World War, but this did not stop Louis from enlisting and donating his money because he believed that it was the most effective way to fight discrimination. Joe Louis, like so many other professional athletes, found himself the victim of poor fiscal management and the beneficiary of a sizable debt to the United States government. Fighting was his livelihood and the only chance he had to earn the money he needed to pay his back taxes. Regardless, he donated his money to his country. This was probably the most important thing that Joe Louis did in his career that affected race relations. Blacks and whites alike sang Louis' praises for his generosity and love of his country. Numerous letters sent to the paper by readers and editorial columns support this.

The material presented in this study suggests that the legacy of Louis' career, the comparisons of Louis to Jack Johnson, and Louis' contributions to his country had a positive impact on civil rights and race relations in the United States from the viewpoint of the black community.

The Muhammad Ali Era

The data collected in this study shows that the career of Muhammad Ali had a neutral impact on civil rights and race relations in the United States from the viewpoint of the black community, as interpreted through a qualitative analysis of the content provided by the *Chicago Defender*. Three trends repeatedly appeared in the *Defender's* coverage that support this: the legacy of Ali's career, Ali's religious affiliations, and Ali's stance on Vietnam.

Muhammad Ali had a successful career as a heavyweight champion. He became just the second man to win the heavyweight title twice. His claim as "The Greatest" was adopted by people the world over, and Ali became an internationally popular black boxer and athlete. Ali's brash and oftentimes comedic nature endeared him to his fan base, if not those critically appraising his career and actions. Ali's career had a positive impact on civil rights and race relations because his success came at a time when blacks were fighting for civil rights in more confrontational ways. Ali's success was shared by blacks who were still disenfranchised. Ali's brash nature identified him to a young generation of whites and blacks alike, and presented America with a new idea of what it meant to be black and proud.

Ali's religious affiliations were a point of contention with regard to civil rights and race relations. While many supported Ali's right to worship in whatever form and fashion he chose, many did not support what he chose to worship. Ali's ties to the pro-segregation, black nationalist Nation of Islam were strictly counterproductive to the civil rights movement that sought to abolish segregation. This earned Ali both praise and scorn. Many praised him for standing up for himself and being whatever he wished to be. Others criticized Ali for joining what they believed to be a religion of hatred and intolerance. In the end, the data suggested that Ali had as many detractors as he did supporters.

Ali's stance on Vietnam was another point of contention with regard to civil rights and race relations. When Ali refused induction into the Armed Forces to serve in the Vietnam War, he had as many detractors as supporters. He was supported and admired, again, for standing his

ground and remaining steadfast in his beliefs, but he was criticized for what many saw as an unpatriotic, un-American, and cowardly refusal to serve his country. The data, again, is divided. Many *Defender* readers wrote letters condemning Ali, with just as many supporting him. The same is true of editorials.

The material presented in this study suggests that the legacy of Ali's career, Ali's religious affiliations, and Ali's stance on Vietnam had an overall neutral impact on civil rights and race relations in the United States from the viewpoint of the black community, as interpreted through a qualitative analysis of the content provided by the *Chicago Defender*.

CONTRASTS AND COMPARISONS

The material on Joe Louis and Muhammad Ali invites comparison. The early coverage on each fighter was much different. The cause for this could be location-based. Louis began his career in Chicago, home of the *Defender*, whereas Ali began his career in the South. It could also have to do with the period in which each man lived and plied his skills. When Louis was breaking into the heavyweight ranks, there were fewer successful, skilled black boxers. This could also have contributed to Louis receiving more coverage during his early career.

As well, the manner in which each boxer's career was treated was different. Louis was focused on as a boxer. First and foremost, his skills never took a backseat to his life outside the ring. Muhammad Ali, on the other hand, was known as much for his "lip" than his skill. His career inside the ring was almost secondary to his career outside the ring. This was especially true during the early period in each fighter's career. Louis' string of early victories was reported on intensely, whereas Ali was the brash, talkative heavyweight champion who "lacked the skill" to become great.

The way the public and the writers responded to each fighter was vastly different. Louis was almost universally loved. It was not often that a negative word was spoken about him. If something was written about Louis that was not overly positive, then it was usually written with guarded optimism; a self-fulfilling prophecy of sorts. An example of this can be seen following Louis' initial loss at the hands of Schmeling. The *Defender's* coverage following the loss indicated that Joe may not be the greatest heavyweight of all time like they thought. This allowed the *Defender* to save face if Louis did not blossom into the man he did. The coverage on Ali was essentially split down the middle. For every opinion supporting Ali, there was an opinion that did

not support him. Ali seemed to receive most of his support from the *Defender's* reader base, rather than its editorial staff. Louis, on the other hand seemed to receive support from both the readers and the writers.

The biggest contrast between these two men, and a most important consideration, is the time in which each boxer fought in the professional ranks. Joe Louis fought during a time when desegregation and integration were the main aims. Militancy was seen as a harmful weapon against discrimination. In Ali's time, his brash nature was accepted, indeed at times glorified. Non-violent protest began to give way to increasing militancy and extremism, with groups like the Nation of Islam and the Black Panthers grating against American society. To examine one boxer under the time constraints of the other is impossible and irresponsible. Observing Ali through the lens of Joe Louis' time would present Ali as a racist bigot. Examining Joe Louis through the lens of Ali's time would paint him as an Uncle Tom. To say that Louis should have been more outspoken or that Ali should have been more reserved does not respect the social climate in which each man found themselves.

CONCLUSION

The results of this study seem to contradict what is commonly assumed today. Joe Louis is rarely given popular credit for anything involving civil rights or race relations. Muhammad Ali accused Louis of being an Uncle Tom, a label that has remained to this day. Instead of a patriot, like the material suggests, he is viewed as the "white man's black man" who did what he was told and never fought for anything more. Muhammad Ali, on the other hand, is seen as a great civil rights leader. The evidence provided in the *Defender* seems to indicate that half the country supported his hardline stance against traditional mores, while the other half viewed him as a hate-mongering racist.

This study, when viewed within its proper context, shows that these boxer had an effect on civil rights and race relations in the black community. The data found in the *Chicago Defender* suggests that Joe Louis played a positive role in promoting race relations and advancing civil rights. The effect that Muhammad Ali had, based on the data, is seen as neutral. He played a positive role at times, but there were also many instances where the data suggested that he was a negative factor in the realm of civil rights and race relations.

EPILOGUE

Joe Louis

Life after boxing was difficult for Joe Louis. The tax fiasco that forced Louis back into the ring was no closer to being resolved. In 1950, before he returned to the ring, Louis received a bill from the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) for \$246,056. By 1957, audits and time had increased the amount to \$1,243, 097. In 1962, Louis and the IRS reached an agreement: recognizing he would never repay the amount owed, but not officially forgiving the debt, the IRS agreed to stop harassing Louis for his back taxes. When Louis died, the amount he owed was roughly \$2 million.¹

Though his tax troubles were forgiven, Louis still had demons. At some point in the 1950s – even Louis is unsure when – he began to abuse drugs, specifically cocaine and heroin. In the 1960s, Louis gradually migrated to Las Vegas where he held a job as a greeter at Caesars Palace, a hotel and casino. Randy Roberts justified Louis’ migration to Las Vegas as the most fitting place for Louis: “Las Vegas was a shrine to a time when Joe Louis was the Man.” During the late 1960s, Louis began to lose touch with reality. He became increasingly paranoid at night, claiming “they” were after him. To sleep, he built a cave out of mattresses, headboards, dressers, mirrors, and whatever else he could find. He would then attempt to sleep – fully clothed – in his cave, though he was generally unsuccessful. Gradually, Louis’ paranoia spilled over into the daytime hours. By 1970, Martha Jefferson Louis – Louis’ third wife and fourth marriage – had Louis committed to the Veterans Administration Hospital for psychiatric evaluation. The stay in the hospital and the prescription medication helped. By 1971, Louis was back in Las Vegas, a little slower but as amiable as ever. By the end of the decade, Louis’ heart began to fail. In November 1977, Louis’ had heart surgery to repair his aortic valve. A stroke followed the surgery, which confined him to a wheelchair. Downtrodden, Louis never really recovered. His heart continued to weaken, and a pacemaker implant in late 1980 kept him alive for a few months longer. On the morning of 12 April 1981, Joe Louis died of a heart attack.²

Joe Louis body was placed in a copper casket, and the service was held in the boxing ring of the Sports Pavilion of Caesars Palace. Three thousand people attended the ceremony for which Frank Sinatra paid the bill. The Reverend Jesse Louis Jackson, named after Jesse Owens

¹ Randy Roberts, *Joe Louis: Hard Times Man* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 249.

² Roberts, 251-256. The quote about Las Vegas as a shrine to Louis appears on page 252.

and Joe Louis, delivered the eulogy:

This is not a funeral, this is a celebration... We are honoring a giant who saved us in a trouble time... With Joe Louis we had made it from the guttermost to the uttermost; from the slave ship to the championship. Usually the champion rides on the shoulders of the nation and its people, but in this case, the nation rode on the shoulders of the hero, Joe... God sent Joe from the black race to represent the human race. He was the answer to the sincere prayers of the of the disinherited and dispossessed... We all feel bigger today because Joe came this way. He was in the slum, but the slum was not in him. Ghetto boy to man, Alabama sharecropper to champion.

Joe Louis was buried in the Arlington National Cemetery in Arlington, Virginia.³

Muhammad Ali

Though this study only focused on Ali until 1975, his career lasted six more years. In that span, Ali enjoyed an unrivalled popularity: public opinion over Vietnam had soured, Ali had defeated Foreman to recapture the heavyweight championship, and he had beaten Frazier for a third time, both fights occurring on international soil. Ali would fight six more times before he faced Leon Spinks in February 1978. Ali did not train seriously for the fight, and lost to Spinks by unanimous decision. The rematch with Spinks, in September 1978, saw Ali reclaim the heavyweight title a third time, becoming the first man to do so. In July of 1979, Ali retired and relinquished his belt. Ali's retirement was short-lived, as he agreed to fight Larry Holmes in 1980. With a victory, Ali would have become the first four-time heavyweight champion in boxing history. Ali lost the fight, however, when his corner stopped after the tenth round. To those on hand, the fight resembled an execution more than a boxing match. Sylvester Stallone likened it to "watching an autopsy on a man that's still alive." Ali fought once more, at the end of 1981, against Trevor Berbick. Ali lost that fight, as well, and retired permanently.⁴

When Ali made the decision to come out of retirement, his decision was accompanied by a growing concern over his health. Ferdie Pacheco, Ali's long-time trainer, had long believed that Ali's health was failing him and he publicly stated that he believed that Ali should not re-enter the ring. His reflexes inside and outside the ring were slowing down, and both were

³ Roberts, 256-259.

⁴ Thomas Hauser, *Muhammad Ali: His Life and Times* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991), 327-430.

becoming noticeable. In the third Frazier fight, Ali took a savage beating. In interviews, Ali had been talking more slowly and slurring his speech. As the controversy escalated, the Nevada State Athletic Commission that would license the Ali-Holmes bout began to fall into question. As a precondition to the license, the commission ordered a complete physical before allowing to fight. Instead, Ali checked into the Mayo Clinic, where he was examined by a kidney and brain specialist. Reports by each doctor eased the minds of the commission enough to grant Ali a license. Those reports would later be called into question, especially after Ali lost brutally at the hands of Larry Holmes. Four days after the Holmes fight, Ali checked into the UCLA Medical Center in poor condition. Tests showed that he was the victim of improper drug administration by his doctor, Dr. Charles Williams. This improper drug usage lead Ali to believe – and other to convince him – that the drugs, not age, had been to blame for his loss to Holmes. Believing victory was still attainable, Ali signed to fight Trevor Berbick. Having lost that fight as well, Ali retired. In 1984, Ali checked into the Columbia-Presbyterian Medical Center in New York for a series of tests. The visit was prompted by lethargy, trembling, and slurred speech. After eight days of testing, the supervising physician issued a statement saying that Ali did not have Parkinson's disease, but exhibits mild symptoms of Parkinson's syndrome. He also stated that he believed Ali's condition could be treated and reversed with medication, and that there was no reason to believe Ali had a progressive degenerative condition.⁵

Ali's life since his 1984 diagnosis has been markedly different from his life in the ring. His Parkinson's has become worse, and the boisterous Ali that was once so popular has largely been silenced. Despite his condition, his personal life seems peaceful. He is as devout as ever in his faith, and has found happiness with his fourth wife. Through four marriages, he has nine children.⁶

FUTURE RECOMMENDATIONS

First and foremost, the most natural future recommendation for this study would be to acquire and study the last seven years of the *Chicago Defender* that was unattainable.

The next progression for this study would be diversification: more newspapers, specifically the *Pittsburgh Courier*. Examining the *Courier* along with the *Defender* would

⁵ Hauser, 395-462.

⁶ Hauser, 463-515.

provide source material from arguably the two largest black newspapers in American history. Moving further, other important black newspapers could be studied as well.

Another potential for this study would be to delineate by geographical region. The same issue could be examined via black newspapers from the south, north, east, and west. This would make for an interesting compare/contrast exercise; it would also shed light on the climate and feelings throughout black America. Special attention could also be given to the closest black newspaper to Ali's home of Kentucky, as well, to see if it accorded Ali any special treatment like the *Defender* may have to Joe Louis.

The final progression for this study would be to examine the effects that these two boxers had on the white population. There would be a wealth of primary source material available, and the issue could be examined via region, as suggested above. Examining the issue regionally would be very interesting, especially as it pertains to the south. Comparing white and black reactions would add a degree of finality to the topic.

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